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KID-GLOVED LABORERS:
GILDED AGE TELEGRAPHERS AND THE GREAT STRIKE OF 1883

A Dissertation Presented

By

EDWIN GABLER

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A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

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ABSTRACT

Kid-Gloved Laborers:

Gilded Age Telegraphers and the Great Strike of 1883

May 1986

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This is a social and economic study of telegraph operators in late 19th-century America. It takes a nation-wide operators' strike against the Western Union in 1883 as a starting point from which to explore the telegraphers' experiences as employees of a corporate pioneer changing the shape of business enterprise and work, their membership in a "new" lower-middle class coalescing in the period, and their involvement in the wave of labor and reform activism of the 1880s. The study also weighs contemporary reactions to the strike as indications of how Americans interpreted the profound transformations that an industrializing United States was undergoing.

The Western Union was a prototypical large corporation, with its hierarchical, bureaucratic structure, its national scope, and its thousands of employees, most of whom were telegraphers.

As white-collar men and women, operators were

superficially akin to the "old" middle class of professionals and independent entrepreneurs, but as corporate employees with increasingly restricted opportunities for mobility, they represented an unprecedented stratum of dependent, specialized wage-earners. Their peculiar position made their social and cultural boundaries shifting and nebulous.

Although nominally middle class, operators were drawn to the ascendent labor activism of the Knights of Labor in the 1880s, formed a union affiliated with the Knights, and struck against the Western Union in the summer of 1883. Their defeat exposed underlying rifts and cultural antipathies within the labor movement separating the "genteel" operators from blue-collar folk.

The telegraphers' strike also focused Americans' attention on the era's growing problems of concentrated private wealth and power, class conflict, and the changing nature of commonweal. Some contemporaries condemned the strikers and clung to the pieties of classical liberalism, some responded to the strike's implications with ambivalence, and others saw in the episode the contours of a new order in which the organization of labor was a legitimate response to combinations of capital, and in which the public good demanded that the state assume a more positive role to curb the reckless and selfish course of the free market.

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C H A P T E R I

A MILD SORT OF REVOLUTION

On July 16, 1883, after a 35-minute wait, the Executive Committee of the Brotherhood of Telegraphers found itself in the boardroom of the Western Union Company's massive brick and granite headquarters at 195 Broadway in New York, facing General Manager Thomas T. Eckert. Like the building, Eckert cut an imperious figure: a tall, aquiline, thick-necked, mustachioed man who had earned a set of general's stars during the Civil War for his stewardship of the military telegraphs. His character matched his mien. A close associate judged him "stern and at times implacable toward those who have deviated from the path of rectitude," and recalled how the General had once amazed Abraham Lincoln by breaking iron pokers over his forearm to prove how cheaply they were made. Accustomed to command and hierarchy, Eckert now faced an embryonic mutiny. The men assembled across from him represented an operators' union and had come to place a bill of grievances in his hand.[1]

District Master Workman John Campbell, the bespectacled, black-haired leader of the Brotherhood who had spent 20 of his 35 years before a telegraph key, presented his union's demands to Eckert: that compulsory Sunday work be abolished; that day shifts be reduced to 8 hours and

night shifts to 7; that men and women operators--for a significant and growing minority of American telegraphers were "girls"--receive equal pay for equal work; and that all current salaries be advanced 15 per cent. When Campbell had finished, Eckert spoke.

"Have you a list of the aggrieved persons?"

"We have not, sir," answered Campbell.

"I would like a list of those whom you represent. Can you not supply the information?"

"Our organization is very widespread, and it would take a long time to--"

"Oh," Eckert shot back, "you can have all the time you desire."

And so the brief, fruitless ritual went. Eckert claimed (quite falsely, as Western Union President Norvin Green later admitted) that he had no way of knowing whether the Committee actually represented his employees, and again demanded a list. The Committee, predictably, again refused. The legacy of secrecy within the Knights of Labor was still strong despite recent steps to discard its furtive ritual, but equally important, the Brotherhood faced the prospect of a struggle with the most powerful corporation in the country, and to furnish the Western Union with a membership list would be suicidal. For Eckert, on the other hand, recognizing the Brotherhood's legitimacy was equally unthinkable--an admission that the prerogatives of capital had

limits, and that employees, like employers, might also pursue self-interest through combination. If the Executive Committee had hoped to bargain with Eckert, it left disappointed. "Don't forget the list," the General told the departing delegation. "As I remarked before, you can have all the time you want."[2]

But time, as the Brotherhood's leaders viewed things, was in short supply. Acting on a mandate from their constituent Local Assemblies to petition the Western Union (and several lesser companies) for a redress of grievances, they might, failing a satisfactory response, lead the nation's commercial telegraphers in a great strike on July 18th. As the deadline approached, there were last-minute consultations with national officers of the Knights of Labor in New York, and then an ultimatum from the union: if the telegraph companies would not deal with the Brotherhood in some way, the Brotherhood would paralyze the companies.

The suddenness with which the confrontation between the operators and the Western Union emerged in the public eye was deceptive. Corporate telegraph consolidation and operator discontent had grown in tandem in the years following the Civil War, prompting telegraphers to cautiously flirt with labor organization in the 1860s, and to go a step further in 1870 with a brief and disastrous strike against the Western Union. The company prospered nonetheless,

growing so robustly that calling the Western Union a monopoly in 1883 was not so much uttering an epithet as describing a virtual reality. But the telegraph giant's financial health contrasted with the lot of its operators, men and women who decried a widening gap between their skill and worth and their remuneration and status. Once again they turned to unionism, this time linking their cause in 1881 with that of the Knights of Labor, a promising allegiance that sought to unite all "producers" and replace a competitive society with a cooperative one. The Brotherhood of Telegraphers of the United States and Canada--District Assembly 45 of the Knights--in the best spirit of the Order, was an industrial union comprising all who created the telegraph companies' wealth, whether smartly-dressed operators who manipulated delicate and temperamental instruments or rough-hewn linemen shod with muck-encrusted climbing boots. And it was, in fact, in a dispute over a lineman that the fledgling Brotherhood exchanged preliminary blows with telegraph managers in May 1883, the same month that the union membership approved recourse to a strike should the companies spurn the bill of grievances drafted in March.[3]

By the second week of July, signs of labor troubles within the industry began to appear in the press. There were rumors of an operators' strike, the report of a stillborn messenger boys' walkout in Boston,[4] and then, on the

11th, a surprise announcement from Western Union headquarters: as of July 1, day shift operators would put in 9 hours "actual service," night men 7 hours, and all work beyond that, including Sunday shifts, would be payed at regular rates based on a 7-hour day. Beset by talk of an operators' revolt, the company was apparently granting a concession. A Boston telegrapher discerned "signs of weakness" in the gesture, and thought that his union's goals might be won "without the necessity of determined action on the part of the brotherhood."[5] But few operators saw the move as more than a ploy. "Why it's no concession at all," said one New Yorker. "Concession be hanged!" exploded another. A third dismissed it as a "sop" that would "not have the least effect on the work of the brotherhood." By July 14, the Boston Globe was reporting--accurately, as it turned out--that the union would present its demands in two days, giving the companies 48 hours in which to respond or bring a strike down upon their heads.[6]

Despite the "concession" of July 11, the Western Union showed no inclination to dicker with its operators, and after Eckert's rebuff on the 16th, the Brotherhood girded itself accordingly.[7] In New York, the Local Assembly's Master Workman, John Mitchell, spoke confidently of his colleagues' being "well enough 'fixed' to enjoy a two weeks' vacation," and one account claimed 1,000 new recruits for the telegraphers' organization within a three-day

period.[8] Tension and expectation increased along with the possibility that the communications network upon which an industrializing America was becoming increasingly dependent would be rendered dumb and useless. Yet rumors of compromise persisted. On Tuesday, July 17, the Cleveland Plain Dealer hinted at a settlement afoot that would grant the operators improvements in wages and hours while withholding recognition of their Brotherhood. A more authoritative announcement came from the citadel at 195 Broadway the following day. The Western Union's board of directors had appointed a subcommittee to examine employee grievances. Encouraged, the Brotherhood extended the strike deadline another 24 hours. "Things are looking rather better than they did this morning," an operator in Boston told a reporter Wednesday afternoon, noting that the union's leaders "held out considerable hope that our memorial will receive a favorable decision by the directors' Committee." Such optimism proved chimerical. Before the day had passed, General Eckert, in an open telegram to the general superintendent of the corporation's Western Division, Col. Robert C. Clowry, rejected the Brotherhood petition point by point, adding, for good measure, an indictment of the organization for the alleged wire-cutting of its linemen in New York and for using deceptive recruiting methods. The union, in turn, denounced the Western Union directors' subcommittee as "a game of bluff" and gave notice that the strike deadline

extension would be final.[9]

Both sides continued to dig their opposing breastworks. The company assembled lists of potential replacements for rebellious operators from among those currently unemployed or working private wires. The Western Union could also draw on its own large labor pool to break a strike. In Philadelphia, District Superintendent John E. Zeublin returned to the city with a complement of fifty telegraphers in tow culled from surrounding rural posts, and in New York a company director explained that in the event of a walkout, some 100 branch offices in the city would close, freeing their operators to act as a reserve force to meet the emergency. At Western Union headquarters, an anonymous wag had stuck a calendar in the elevator, circling the original strike date and next to it writing, "The Impending Crisis."[10]

On Thursday morning, July 19, with but three hours left to run out, John Campbell wired Eckert with a final plea to negotiate:

> It is with an earnest desire for the harmonious settlement of difficulties and regard for the social and business interests of the people that we send this last appeal for the recognition of the rights and redress of the grievances of your employes.

The General's silence was the company's answer. A New York Tribune reporter stationed at the main office recorded a "constant passing to and fro of operators, apparently

carrying messages and signals," a scene doubtless replicated in the nearly twoscore other principal offices. At 12:11 (noon Washington time), Frank R. Phillips, a chubby, 25-year-old telegrapher, broke the tension and commenced the revolt at Western Union headquarters with a whistle blast that stopped the business of the great operating room cold.[11]

Orderly but exuberant, three hundred or more of his colleagues joined Phillips in quitting the building. The largely youthful strikers filed out onto the street where sympathetic lunchtime throngs cheered and applauded them. Inside, Day Manager William J. Dealy watched the exodus calmly as his boss, District Superintendent Walter C. Humstone, rushed to the operating room with a brace of policemen, just in case. They were not necessary. "Commit no unlawful act," John Campbell had cautioned his followers in his official strike order, and they seemed to be scrupulously heeding his advice.[12]

Similar tableaux, on a smaller scale, took place elsewhere that afternoon. Passers-by near Western Union offices in Chicago and Philadelphia gave vocal support to the telegraphers emerging from their erstwhile workplaces. One Philadelphian welcomed them exclaiming, "This is the only way to bring the monopoly to terms," while the crowd in Chicago seemed especially taken by the young women operators bringing up the rear of the procession "with smiling faces, and swinging their still unopened lunch boxes on their

arms." "They were greeted," the Boston Herald reported, "with such remarks as 'Good girls,' 'You're the daisies,' 'The girls are no slouches, after all,' and similar expressions of approval on the part of the spectators." Despite the heartfelt antipathy of operator and public alike for the Western Union, the walkout was surprisingly free of acrimony. At Cleveland, at Philadelphia, even at the large Chicago office, some departing operators and their former managers shook hands, expressed regret at the turn of events, and wished each other well. At other places, the strike simply happened. After his force had quietly left, Atlanta's Manager Stephens surveyed his denuded operating room and laconically told a reporter, "It looks like Sunday."[13]

The rebellion had not paralyzed the Western Union, but it did severely shock it, confusing and disrupting service across the continent. The truncated telegram addressed to a hapless Albany resident that read:

Aunt's will is open. You are left..,

may not have been typical, but it reflected the chaos of the strike's first hours. One company officer described himself as "flabbergasted" by the blow, and David Homer Bates, then Assistant General Manager, later confessed that "the business of the company between its principal offices was considerably delayed" during the early phase of the walkout. Customers handing in completed telegram blanks

at Western Union receiving counters were greeted by placards informing them that messages would only be accepted "subject to delay and to mailing en route if necessary." An account of the stricken New York office peopled the operating room with "young and middle-aged men with a fagged-out appearance" and a host of check-boys and check-girls who sat idly at keys. The situation was so grim that chief operators and even senior managers were supposed to have manned instruments.[14]

Though groggy, the Western Union returned the punch. It closed most small branch offices in New York City and summoned their operators to the vital facilities at 195 Broadway. It actively recruited scabs, including former telegraphers who had abandoned the craft for other pursuits. And it sought to boost the morale and stamina of its non-striking employees. "Extend to those in your division, both men and women," Eckert wired Superintendent Clowry in Chicago, "my best thanks and leave nothing undone to provide for their wants. Spare no expense in this respect." The General was as good as his word. Cots appeared in company offices to rest relays of operators, rented carriages shuttled loyal "girls" between work and home, and free meals and cigars--the latter ordinarily banned from operating rooms--were provided to telegraphers who remained. This corporate largesse proved considerable. After the strike, Western Union President Norvin Green told a Senate

committee that the cost of salary bonuses and other inducements to scabs had set the firm back more than its revenue losses.[15] But the company got its money's worth. Matt Davin, a telegrapher of 24 years' experience who joined the strike after nearly a week of scabbing, recounted his ordeal during the first day at Boston:

> I was ordered from my instrument at the Board of Trade at 12.30 on the day of the strike. I sat down at the New York wire, received without interruption until 10.30 P.M., when I rested myself by sending a little. I then began receiving again, and continued taking 'copy' until 5.30 A.M. In all my experience that was the biggest 'roast' I ever had.

The next morning, a reporter posted at the Western Union's Boston office observed a group of loyal operators resume their places at their desks "with an air of weariness" born of the previous night's grueling service.[16]

Things were no better for the great monopoly as the walkout passed its second day. In New York, a Times man caught up with a bevy of check-girls as the young messengers left work at 195 Broadway. They told of scabs baffled by the important duplex and quadruplex instruments that handled much of the company's first-line business, and who, moreover, wrote with pencils rather than pen and ink, producing "wretched copy." "[Y]ou would kill yourself laughing," said one of the girls, "if you could see some of them work." But the Times was in no mood to laugh. Its columns were heavily dependent upon press wires, and the

paper now complained of bungled dispatches, many of them turned out in a hand "like that of schoolboys."[17]

Thus besieged, Western Union headquarters was rich in rumor and speculation the first week of the strike. On July 21, the Boston Globe spoke of dissension and squabbling within the highest circles of the firm. Jay Gould, the Western Union's principal stockholder and its presumed master, the story went, was dismayed at the powerful blow delivered by the operators and pressing his colleagues to meet the Brotherhood's demands. More dramatically, two days later, the Globe ran an account of an alleged confrontation between Gould and Eckert in a hallway at 195 during which the diminutive stock jobber as good as called the burly manager "a fool or a knave." The company denied the whole affair, and an Atlanta daily had Gould declaring that the strike was in fact a good thing for enabling the Western Union to close its marginal offices. For all its color, the Gould-Eckert rift was probably apocryphal. What was unquestionably genuine were the troubles that their corporation now faced.[18]

The striking operators, conversely, were sanguine. Daily meetings bolstered their solidarity and spirits. The prelude to one such rally in New York, on July 21, involved hundreds of telegraphers and linemen marching in procession behind a small, rebus-like flag that bore the words "Western Union" and a picture of a padlock. There were more

accessions to the strikers' ranks as well. About thirty messenger boys entered a New York meeting on the 21st to the accompaniment of a standing ovation from the audience, and by the 24th, the union claimed 2,000 new members across the nation--including junior managers such as the 12 chief operators who reportedly quit at New York.[19] Nor was the Brotherhood either shy or passive about gaining proselytes. "Skirmishing Committees" sent out operators to intercept and "capture" potential scabs. Posted primarily at railroad depots and outside telegraph offices, the union men (and sometimes women) met incoming strikebearers, sought to dissuade them from taking the company's part, and frequently wound up initiating them into the operators' organization. "The boys here are very jubilant," declared the Detroit Brotherhood of its skirmishing forays. "Everything that looks like an operator is captured and taken to our spacious parlors, where they are wined, dined, etc." At New York, at Augusta, Georgia, at Cleveland, at Philadelphia, Indianapolis, New Orleans, Boston, and Buffalo, the story was the same.[20]

The organizational acuity that the skirmishing arrangement bespoke extended to other Brotherhood operations. "Pigeons" remained behind at work in various offices, ostensibly loyal employees who were in fact union spies who used the company's own facilities to send coded messages coordinating the strikers' campaign.[21] And like the Western

Union, the Brotherhood of Telegraphers understood the power of the press in molding public attitudes. Local Assemblies in large cities formed special Press Committees to supply journalists with strike bulletins and as flattering a picture of the Brotherhood and its crusade as possible.[22]

To paint such a picture, the union layed great emphasis on its members' responsibility and sobriety. "Strike," after all, savored of conflict, of social instability and of violence, of an America engulfed in class war--the paroxysm on the railroads of only six years before been "strike" writ large. Mindful of those implications, and also reflecting many operators' gentlemanly self-image, the Brotherhood aimed to conduct its battle with the Western Union on the highest plane. "Advise the members," John Campbell wired the Cleveland Local Assembly on July 21, "to be temperate in language and under no circumstances to violate the laws." When stories of alleged wire-cutting of Western Union circuits appeared in the first week of the walkout, the Brotherhood not only denounced such tactics, but offered a reward in Chicago to help catch any saboteurs.[23] Temperate behavior also meant a cold water diet for the duration. Operators at New Orleans and Baltimore took the pledge, and at the first strike meeting in New York, John Mitchell presented his assembled fellows with a resolution to swear off drink that passed, the Tribune noted, "with an 'aye' that shook the building." At St.

Louis and New York, striking telegraphers enjoyed steamboat excursions without the benefit of alcoholic stimulation.[24]

These efforts were not in vain; someone was indeed watching all this and nodding approvingly. "Have the telegraphers inaugurated a new order of strike?" the Boston Globe asked.

> The universal good order that marks their movement--the refraining from all compulsory and violent measures and the keeping strictly within the legitimate limits of the striker--are so unusual in such manifestations that they excite much comment and gain and keep for the brotherhood the warmest sympathy.

And sympathy in the most conservative of places: "One prominent [Boston] merchant," the Globe reported, "remarked that he did not approve of the strike, but sympathized with the strikers. Others, while deprecating strikes in general, were hopeful that in this case the strikers would succeed." The august New York Times assured its readers that the telegraphers were "not a rabble of workmen misled by demagogues, but a body of intelligent men and women, quite capable of thinking for themselves," a verdict that Harper's Weekly echoed when it pronounced them "intelligent and voting labor . . . chiefly American, and of characteristic American intelligence and feeling." Before the strike was ended, the Board of Aldermen in New York and Chicago's City Council had both passed resolutions lauding the operators' cause.[25]

Antimonopolism and hatred of the man behind the

Western Union, Jay Gould, no doubt had much to do with the pro-Brotherhood sentiment. "If there is any monopoly in this country that ought to be crushed," declared Chicago merchant Julian S. Ramsey, "it is the Western Union Telegraph Company." In late July, a silk manufacturer from New York named John D. Cutter proposed to do just that by forming a new telegraphic enterprise--the Merchants' and Telegraphers' Association--to break the dependence of his fellow businessmen on the communications giant. And greedy corporations were run by greedy men. One daily pointed out that the broad support for the strike was as much due to "the moral character and public disservices of Mr. JAY GOULD" as to the operators' exemplary behavior.[26]

Nor was praise for the Brotherhood universal. At editorial desk, pulpit, and counting house, the operators at times met with chilly neutrality, ambivalence, or outright hostility. The New York Sun, originally sympathetic to the cause, executed an about-face and scored the strikers as "highwaymen and cut-throats," joining Whitelaw Reid's New York Tribune, which found the union's bill of grievances "as a whole . . . unreasonable" and "especially objectionable in the way it was presented." From the valleys of Western Massachusetts, the Hampshire Gazette and Northampton Currier spoke out against the strike for threatening republican values. "Why should a free-born American citizen," it wondered, "'stop work' or resume work at the

'order' of anybody on the face of the earth?" The Atlanta Constitution, no friend of the Western Union, was also troubled by the operators' challenge to the freedom of contract and the beneficence of laissez faire--as well as by the specter of "a parcel of men" who would "coerce their employers to increase their wages or to accede to other arbitrary demands . . ." The council of Montreal's Board of Trade likewise condemned what it judged the Brotherhood's dictation to the companies, but down at Baltimore the members of the Corn and Flour Exchange chose to remain aloof from the conflict. And when Boston operators invited Governor Ben Butler to take part in a support rally in mid-August, he gingerly balanced his corpulent frame astride the middle of the fence, pleading the imperatives of office that he remain disinterested.[27]

But it was the breadth of sympathy for the Brotherhood that was noteworthy, and more than moral support came its way. Boston businessmen reportedly offered strikers amounts ranging from $5 to $1,000 early in the contest, and dispatches from elsewhere also had bankers, brokers, and merchants chipping in to the cause.[28] The owners of excursion steamers placed their vessels at the disposal of the Brotherhood gratis in New York, Washington, and Boston to provide the operators a summer day's outing.[29] At Pittsburgh, a company of amateur minstrels entertained some 2,500 people and succeeded in raising $500 for the

union, while at Madison Square Garden in New York, the far from amateur bandmaster Patrick Gilmore lent his services in a benefit concert on August 8.[30] Baseball fans expressed their support for the telegraphers by attending exhibition games in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, and at Boston, where John L. Sullivan agreed to preside as umpire.[31] Prominent individuals also made donations. Buffalo's Mayor Manning gave $50 to the operators, Congressman J.H. McLean of St. Louis and Cleveland's ex-Mayor Rose each sent double that amount, and a former telegrapher named Thomas A. Edison fattened the Brotherhood strike fund with a gift of $700.[32]

As important as the widespread public backing for the walkout--perhaps even more important--was the attitude of working people to the striking Brotherhood. As a branch of the steadily-growing Knights of Labor, District Assembly 45 could expect the fraternal support of the Order, and on the surface, at least, the solidarity of the parent body with the operators seemed unbroken. Grand Master Workman Terence V. Powderly, in Philadelphia on August 3 to help celebrate the birthday of Knights founder Uriah S. Stephens, told an inquiring journalist that the Brotherhood seemed financially sound, called the operators' actions "proper," and vowed that his organization would "stand by them to the last moment." "Do I understand aright in supposing," another reporter had asked Washington D.C. operator Robert L.

De Akers the previous day, "that the Knights of Labor act as a unit in making this strike a test case?" Replied De Akers, "I think you do." The prospect of having the hearts and pocketbooks of the Knights on their side was an exhilarating tonic for the telegraphers.[33]

Working-class support was not limited to fellow Knights. Central trades bodies lined up behind the operators, as did individual unions: Screwmen and Cotton Yard Men in New Orleans, Seamen in Cleveland, Tanners and Curriers in Boston, Journeymen Horse-Shoers, Longshoremen, and Brownstone Cutters in New York, and others provided encouragement and cash.[34] Printers displayed an especial alacrity and generosity, and could do much more than talk solidarity. At Elmira, New York, typographers passed a resolution of sympathy with the Brotherhood that one of the town's papers, the Advertiser, refused to print; that evening, another Elmira journal, the Gazette, came out with a pro-Western Union editorial. Indignant, the printers called a retaliatory strike at both places.[35]

If the telegraphers' cause captured public sympathy, the strike itself managed to capture the public fancy. Midsummer tended to dullness, and with little else to flavor the bland news diet of July and August--President Chester A. Arthur's junket to the West graced more than one front page--the Brotherhood's struggle with Gould's monopoly provided conversational spice at the dinner tables,

waiting rooms, workshops, and bar rails of America. The New York Morning Journal acknowledged the strike with the verses of "Tick, Tick, Tick!", one of whose quatrains exclaimed:

> O, woe to the Western U,
> And the holders of its shares!
> O, woe to the sender of news,
> As he madly stamps and swears!

Life, the humor magazine, devoted an installment of its "Popular Science Catechism" to the strike, satirizing the Western Union for its use of incompetent scab operators.[36] Quick-witted merchants also capitalized on the affair's topicality. Readers of the August 3 Boston Globe found this shouting for their attention:

"A GREATER STRIKE

THAN THE

TELEGRAPH TROUBLES

> "Nearly everyone is interested in the strike of the telegraph operators although, whichever way it may turn out, it will be no pecuniary benefit to them. But the strike in which all Boston has a pecuniary interest is the strike which the Misfit Parlors, 4 Hayward Pl., have made, and which enables them to place fine custom-made clothing on the market . . ."

An Atlanta dry-goods house made similar use of the walk-out.[37] The freshness and excitement of the strike story could suffer with time and repetition, certainly. One columnist bemoaned "the impatience characteristic of Americans" that made them turn away, jaded, from "so great a revolution as the strike" to seek ever new stimuli

elsewhere.[38] Still, it was hard to ignore the events of that summer. If most people did not themselves use the telegraph, the newspapers that they read did, and both the Brotherhood and the Western Union were determined to keep the strike imbedded in the national consciousness.

The company's spokesman at Washington, Superintendent Zeublin, eagerly provided newspapermen with the Western Union point of view. A week into the strike, Zeublin, whose patriarchally flowing beard belied his forty years, regaled journalists by describing arrangements to board and feed scabs that wisely included limiting their fare to soup and vegetables, because "meats would make them sleepy at night." Papers with New York correspondents got corporate pronouncements even closer to the center of power through Press Agent William B. Somerville, head of the Western Union's news wire department, and a kind of embryonic P.R. man for the firm during the walkout.[39] His press conferences became as much a daily fixture of the struggle as Brotherhood strike meetings. They earned him a nickname as well. When his increasingly optimistic bulletins reporting various circuits as "O.K." conflicted with reports of continued disruptions of Western Union service, skeptics in the press flippantly christened him, "O.K. Somerville," and for the remainder of the strike "O.K." became shorthand for the dubious veracity of the telegraph giant.[40] Nor was the company's standing with the public helped any

by its close and dominant relation with the Associated Press, the nation's major wire service. The Brotherhood, naturally enough, claimed that AP dispatches distorted, fabricated, or suppressed news to suit the Western Union cause, but at least two journalists echoed the charges.[41]

Truthful or not, Somerville's was not the only voice to speak for the Western Union that summer. An enterprising Boston Globe correspondent managed to locate and interview no less than five of the company's directors--Russell Sage, Sidney Dillon, Cyrus W. Field, C.P. Huntington, and one who demanded anonymity--on the same day. Sage extolled the benefits to the public of monopoly in lowering prices. Field and his nameless fellow capitalist spoke of their duty to the firm's investors ("we have small stockholders, many of them widows and orphans"), while Huntington reminded his inquisitor that he, too, had once been a "laboring man." Sidney Dillon, chatting with the reporter without interrupting his work of signing a stack of railroad bonds, (each of which an attending office boy in turn blotted), attacked the union for seeking to restrict the secrets of telegraphy to its membership. And all but one of the directors, for some reason, seemed especially indignant that the strike had commenced with a whistle blast.[42]

But signals of another kind, in late July and early August, suggested an intensified, if ambiguous, turn of events in the struggle. On July 25, the Brotherhood and

the American Rapid Telegraph Company announced that they had reached a settlement, (the terms of which, however, were not made public for another two weeks--a move that caused some operators to chafe and complain of the secrecy involved.)[43] The agreement was heartening news for the strikers, the first victory for their young organization in its challenge to corporate power. Yet as corporate power went in 1883, the American Rapid was still small game. The operators would have to wring concessions and recognition from more than a third-rate company.

For the time being, a second-rate company might do. Concurrent with the American Rapid accord were hints that the Baltimore & Ohio, too, would reach an understanding with the strikers. While nowhere near the size of the Western Union, the B & O, a subsidiary of the railroad of the same name, was its closest rival, and were it to follow the Rapid's lead, it would strengthen the Brotherhood considerably in its contest with the great monopoly. Something indeed seemed afoot between the Brotherhood and the B & O. John Campbell later claimed that as early as July 21, the company, like the American Rapid, had secretly sent emissaries to meet with the strikers. By the 30th, Eugene J. O'Connor, chairman of the Brotherhood's Executive Committee, was telling a reporter that delicate negotiations between the two parties were in progress, complicated by B & O President Robert Garrett's fears of the ramifications for

his rail empire of dealing with a union. Garrett's anxieties eventually overcame his desire for a settlement--according to John Campbell, because some Brotherhood members, their tongues lubricated by drink, had prematurely bragged of having won B & O recognition and so frightened off the skittish Garrett. Whatever the cause, the parley collapsed and the B & O rejoined its larger competitor in resisting the operators.[44]

Despite the rebuff, the union still looked and sounded plucky as July gave way to August. Eugene O'Connor claimed 6,000-7,000 accessions to the Brotherhood since the start of the strike, and Local Assemblies prepared to dispense strike allowances to those claiming the need of it--$5 a week for single operators, $7 for those supporting others--on the accustomed August 1 payday.[45] The Brotherhood did suffer minor setbacks. Here and there, strikers defected and returned to work. The Boston Herald told its readers about the Western Union's attempts to stampede operators in New York and the Hub into a panicky abandonment of the strike. Six or seven forsook the cause at Boston, where one journalist recorded "a general feeling of despondence among the members of the brotherhood," but other reporters were more impressed by the local strikers' continuing determination--dramatically manifested at a strike meeting where 200 telegraphers, "rising in their places and with their left hands on their hearts

and their right raised aloft," solemnly rededicated themselves to their cause.[46]

Operators stiffened their resolve with the more tangible fillip that strike pay could provide. In New York, some 800 of them drew an allotment, although quite a few, perhaps 400, "having saved considerable amounts preparatory to this movement," declined to dip into the Brotherhood war chest.[47] The strikers in any event seemed well situated, for union officials spoke with pride and assurance of their organization's financial health. And beyond the Brotherhood strike fund lay the massed support of fellow Knights of Labor, whose membership assessments, at 10¢ a head, could yield the telegraphers $80,000 a week. All this made for a sanguine operator rank and file--despite a few contrary and nagging tocsins: that after strike pay was disbursed in New York some operators were reported to feel "fairly if not generously dealt with;" that the expected assessments from the Knights had been delayed; that the Local Assembly at Boston, while professing to be financially comfortable, announced on July 30 that it had decided, in order "to be well prepared for contingencies," to accept the offers of businessmen and the public of monetary aid and establish a "skirmishing fund." But this was pale stuff in the light of frequent and emphatic Brotherhood statements that the organization was solvent, even affluent.[48] Had not Grand Master Workman

Powderly himself implied that the telegraphers stood on solid pecuniary ground? He had--in public. Privately, he found them chest-deep in quicksand. "I fear they must lost the battle," he confided to Grand Secretary Robert Layton on August 6, "though I talk to the contrary." Two days later, again to Layton, Powderly repeated his gloomy forecast: "Well if the Tel. Ops. fail now it won't be your fault and I am afraid for them, for I don't think they made ample preparation, if they did I know nothing of it."[49]

There was good reason for Powderly's sotto voce alarm. On August 1, as Eugene O'Connor cheerily announced "an immense improvement in the outlook for our cause," the placards in Western Union offices warning customers that their telegrams were only accepted "subject to delay," disappeared.[50] Four days later, in a tacit admission that they had still not brought Western Union to terms, Brotherhood officers directed their railway operator members to present the Gould and B & O-affiliated lines with a bill of grievances and, if spurned, to strike against those roads. Such a strike had great potential to wreak mischief and inconvenience for the companies. There was heady talk of 7,000-10,000 operators quitting their keys to join those already out, and even indications that other railroad workers--including the conservative engineers--might throw in their lot with the telegraphers. Brotherhood

leaders had now intensified the scope of the struggle with the Western Union, risking the fate not only of the operators at trackside but of the Brotherhood. "The moral [sic] effect of a failure," one troubled operator predicted,

> will undoubtedly be bad; some of the weak-kneed brothers will regard it as an indication of weakness on the part of the Brotherhood, and it will be a very difficult matter to keep them from going back to work . . . If on the other hand they [the railroad operators] leave their work, we will feel encouraged and will yet win the fight.

As the strike order went out, the sympathetic New York Times found John Campbell and Eugene O'Connor "somewhat anxious" but still talking of victory. The focus of the conflict shifted now to the thousands of telegraphers in the depots and junctions that punctuated the railway lines. The Brotherhood held its collective breath and awaited their response.[51]

Sputtering feebly, then dying, the rail operators' walkout was a miserable failure. By August 13, weary and disheartened union organizers returned to Baltimore after having unsuccessfully sought to initiate new members on the B & O system. The results along the other roads were equally frustrating. Nor had the promise of support from the train crews been more than talk. P.M. Arthur of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, that model of narrow and selfish trade unionism, studiously distanced himself

from the telegraphers' struggle. "We have paddled our own canoe for twenty years," he smugly declared, "and I hope we shall always continue to do so."[52]

The telegraphers' canoe, in contrast, had just lost its paddle. Now signs of desperation, heretofore absent or muted, emerged on the Brotherhood side. Incidents of sabotage, principally wire cutting, were reported more frequently in early August. On August 7, District Superintendent Thomas Roche, whose bailiwick included the Boston area, announced that 41 wires passing under the Connecticut River had been severed, demonstrating "a growing weakness on the part of the strikers," and the next day, his opposite number at New York, Walter Humstone, reported a further 89 Western Union wires rendered useless. Brotherhood officials, evidently sincerely, again denied responsibility and repeated pledges to help prosecute offenders, expel them from the union, and provide repair crews to make good the damage. James Smith, the Master Workman who presided over New York's striking lineman, added the promise of a "slugging" for the miscreants as well. Probably never more than a small minority of strikers was involved in the guerrilla campaign against the wires, but the carefully cultivated Brotherhood image of a "gentlemanly" contest with the telegraph monopoly suffered.[53]

It suffered even more in episodes in which people, rather than property, were threatened. There were isolated

charges of union intimidation in the first two weeks of the strike, while the operators' prospects still looked bright, but in the aftermath of the railroad fiasco and amid hints of financial difficulties, resistance could take on a darker hue.[54] On August 6, William ("Buffalo Bill") Steele, a scab lineman expelled by the New York Brotherhood the week before for disorderly conduct, taunted a group of striking linemen, provoked a fight, and inflicted a minor stab wound on one of them. Pummelled by the others and then arrested, Steele left a scar on the Brotherhood as much as on his victim. Master Workman John Mitchell "said that he regretted that for the first time in the history of the strike there had been a fight," wrote a New York Tribune correspondent. "He announced that any man found under the influence of liquor would be dropped from the rolls of the Brotherhood. 'It is impossible,' he said, 'to win this strike and drink whiskey too'."[55]

It was not the last violent incident to taint the Brotherhood. The day after the knife fracas, General Manager Eckert offered a $1,000 reward for the arrest and conviction of the two men who assaulted F. Jesson, a scab operator in New York. In Pittsburgh, also on August 7, a strikebreaker named H.E. Safford was the target of a missile, reportedly thrown by John Burns and another union man. Safford ran to a bridge toll-house, seized the gate-keeper's mace, and turned on his assailants, beating one

of them severely. Attempts at coercion did not always end so bloodily. At Bismarck, Dakota Territory, strikers and their allies adopted the novel tactic of mobbing the local Western Union office, forcing the operator to quit, and then ensconcing him safely in a hotel bed. But the more typical incidents were less whimsical. Early on August 16, an exchange of words in a Cincinnati saloon between strikers and a scab resulted in the latter being "badly beaten and disabled from work," and before the sun rose another Queen City nonstriker, Henry Schwab, suffered a dislocated shoulder at the hands of Brotherhood supporters. The friends of the cause sadly shook their heads. "Hither-to," noted the New Orleans Picayune, "the strikers have won praise from all by gentlemanly conduct." The noble crusade, faltering, had lurched toward the gutter.[56]

But it never fell into it, and this the operators' many sympathizers seemed to realize. Toward the end of the strike, Boston Mayor Albert Palmer wrote the operators, "Your cause is worthy and righteous; your demands are just," while the aging patrician reformer Wendell Phillips assured them that he sided with their struggle "heart and soul." Nor did allegations of union lawlessness stop about 1,500 Bostonians from attending a benefit concert at Tremont Temple on August 16 that enriched the telegraphers' coffers by over $800. In New York, the Senate Committee on Education and Labor, investigating the

general plight of working people and the growing gulf between employing and employed classes, took testimony on the telegraph troubles from a spectrum of witnesses that ranged from young operators to Jay Gould, and offered the strikers a fair and often sympathetic hearing. When an inquiring senator asked John Campbell to define "strike," the Brotherhood chief, choosing his words with exquisite care, called it "a mild sort of revolution." Campbell knew his auditors well.[57]

Yet public and private encouragement could not undo the union's reverses or compensate for its weaknesses. Through the first two weeks of August, reports of the strikers wavering, losing followers, exhausting their funds, or seeking to cut their losses and treat with the monopoly made for dissonant counterpoint against chipper union statements of the campaign's vigor. When the Western Union's Walter Humstone spoke on the 10th of an impending Brotherhood collapse, a trio of strike leaders at New York "all laughed heartily" in response, the Boston Globe noted. Their guffawing was probably forced and painful. John B. Taltavall, editor of the Telegraphers' Advocate and close to the Brotherhood leadership, wrote soon after the affair that as early as August 5, "[t]here was not the shadow of doubt . . . but that the fight was lost, unless a miracle rescued the order from defeat."[58] Indeed, for those reading the papers with a cool and

discerning eye there were signs of a Western Union triumph in the offing: a story from Boston about a waning of operator enthusiasm and growing boredom at the daily strike meetings; another from New York that told of rank and file misgivings and anxiety about their organization's tactics; from Charleston, South Carolina, operators "very sore" about "repeated appeals" to the national Brotherhood for assistance that went unanswered; at Chicago, a "somewhat gloomy" ambience surrounding strike headquarters; and from Baltimore, a dispatch ulcerated with such phrases as: "Two deserted," "break in the ranks," and "backsliding operators."[59]

By the third week of August, with the rebellious telegraphers' backs to the wall and their pockets empty, (some in New York were said to be "sleeping in police stations, living in the cheapest restaurants of the City"), there was little left to do beyond trying to retain a vestige of dignity while conceding defeat.[60] In what the friendly New York Times bluntly called "the dying gasp of the brotherhood," a supposedly independent committee of strikers not representing the telegraphers' union met with Eckert on August 15 to ask on what terms the men and women might return to their desks. The delegation was a fig leaf of glass, and General Eckert seemed to relish the spectacle. When the committee called on him, he did not deign to offer them seats, and they stood

for the entire session. Nor did he miss the opportunity to pounce on one of the members, Thomas O'Reilly, when the latter answered Eckert's query about whom he represented by blurting out, "I represent the Wheatstone operators upstairs."

"Upstairs?" Eckert challenged him. "Show me your authority."

"I mean," O'Reilly corrected himself, "the striking Wheatstone operators."

The General refused to deal with the committee, saying only that they could follow the routine procedure of applying individually to their superintendents if they wished to "receive consideration" to be rehired. And that was that. Shortly thereafter, John Campbell sent an open letter to Eckert in which he characterized the General's treatment of the delegation as "arrogant and decidedly disrespectful," and added, a bit disingenuously, that in sending the committee the telegraphers had "wanted to be convinced and to convince the public that the company did not intend to deal fairly with them independently of the brotherhood," and that they now had "all the proof they wanted." But Campbell's indignation could do little to check the defeatism that Eckert's performance had exacerbated.[61]

Two days later, on August 17, Campbell formally acknowledged what most of those familiar with the contest

already knew and declared the strike at an end. At Boston, Eugene O'Connor had just finished rousing the Local Assembly with a fighting speech when Campbell's telegram arrived. Voice quavering and on the verge of tears, he handed the message to Master Workman Charles E. Chute, but Chute, too, fell victim to his emotions and was unable to read the order aloud. Regaining his self-control, O'Connor finally took the wire back from Chute, declared, "My heart is absolutely broken," and then informed his comrades that their union had capitulated. The assembled operators, the Boston Globe recorded, "were apparently struck dumb with amazement . . . It was with an air of stupefaction that one of the prominent members arose and requested a second reading of the fatal despatch."[62]

Reaction to the defeat was not always so passive. At Chicago, Master Workman A.J. Morris told over 400 strikers at Uhlich's Hall that they need not heed Campbell's order to give up, and telegrams were read from Local Assemblies in Cincinnati, Cleveland, and St. Louis that echoed Morris's call for continued resistance. That afternoon, some 300 operators, accompanied by "several hundred sympathizing trades unionists," defiantly paraded through Chicago's central business district as they sang the well-known antimonopoly ditty about hanging Jay Gould to a sour apple tree. Some strikers tried to preserve a semblance of solidarity and integrity despite their defeat.

In Memphis, the operators asked to return in a body, and at New Orleans, they resolved that married ex-strikers have preference in reinstatement, but managers at both offices rejected these scraps of autonomy and declared that hiring practices would remain a corporate prerogative. From New York, a contented Thomas Eckert issued a bulletin describing the scene at Western Union headquarters. "The first floor is now crowded with strikers," it read. "The end has evidently come."[63]

So it had. And when the initial shock subsided, the vanquished operators asked themselves why.

For one thing, some said, the strike had been poorly managed, strategically and tactically sloppy and amateurish. The timing had been all wrong. Midsummer was the telegraph companies' slowest season, something that several observers had pointed out even in the first roseate days of the walkout.[64] The plan of calling out the commercial operators at once without including the vital press and railroad telegraphers at the same time was faulted too.[65] Beyond that, there were charges that the surrender had been premature, and that the Western Union, far weaker than was generally imagined, might yet have been beaten had the Brotherhood only persevered. One of the returning men at Boston, the Globe reported, "upon finding the business of the company in so mixed a condition, cried because the strikers did not hold out still

longer."[66]

Some operators saw the men leading their union as the villains of the piece. Disgusted strikers at Toledo excoriated John Campbell--whose nickname before the debacle had been "Honest John"--as "the Judas Iscariot of the Brotherhood." At Chicago, Boston, and New York, there was bitter and suspicious talk about the collapse having been a sellout and a "put-up job" by duplicitous union officers.[67]

But the greatest anger, frustration, and sense of betrayal was directed at the Knights of Labor. On the eve of the capitulation, a leader of the New York Brotherhood, admitting defeat, called the Knights, "the most gigantic of frauds," while one of his associates condemned the Order as a "politico-Communistic organization, profuse in promises and criminal in their [sic] non-fulfillment of such promises." Van Cullen Jones, an 11-year veteran of the key and a prominent Boston operator, ascribed his union's "unfortunate termination of the struggle" to the Knight's failure, "as an organized body," to make good on its pledges of financial aid to the Brotherhood. From Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis, similar indictments were broadcast.[68] Not even the humor column of the Telegraphers' Advocate escaped the sour aftertaste of the affair, offering:

> There are many days of hard work before us; but, alas! our Knights of Labor are things of the past.

and,

> When matches strike, they generally get fired. Yes, and a gun is discharged if only the hammer strikes.

and others in a similar vein. Those disillusioned with the Knights went on to draw a lesson from the strike. Surveying the wreckage of the contest, the Telegraphers' Advocate, quasi-official organ of the Brotherhood, concluded that "in future movements for the amelioration of our condition as skilled workers in the world's great workshop, we must rely implicitly upon ourselves."[69]

Knights supporters rejected the Brotherhood charges, countered that the telegraphers' walkout had been foolishly planned and executed, and noted that the financial backing demanded of the Order had not only been extravagant but, within the rules of the organization, illegal. "If they went into the strike with their eyes open, which as intelligent men I presume they did," Knights Assistant Grand Secretary Gilbert Rockwood told a Pittsburgh paper, "they knew well enough that all the assistance they could promptly get from the Knights of Labor would be voluntary contributions"--not the general assessment that the strike leaders claimed was promised and then denied them. Declared John S. McClelland, both a telegrapher and secretary of the Knights national General Executive

Board: "Too much reliance altogether was placed upon the Knights of Labor in this case, and too much blame is given them, now that the strike has failed." In private, McClelland was much harsher with fellow operators who had turned against the Knights. "There is a widespread determination to sever connection with the K. of L.," he wrote Grand Secretary Robert Layton, "and the d____d asses don't know what for . . . Too bad they were beaten but we are not to blame, and its influence wont be as disastrous as pictured."[70]

Few members of the shattered union could have shared McClelland's optimism. While the battle may have cost the Western Union as much as $2,000,000 all told, President Norvin Green pronounced his firm's strike losses "the best financial investment ever made by the company." "General Eckert tells me," Green explained, "he will get one-third more work out of a man each day, and that is economy."[71] For those operators rehired--and evidently most eventually were[72]--the humiliation of defeat included the signing of an ironclad contract followed by harassment of varying kinds and degrees.[73] At the corporation's main New York office, the Telegraphers' Advocate reported in September, Manager Dealy, Assistant Superintendent Irwin, ("The only Irishman, with one exception, in the telegraph business, who is ashamed to acknowledge his nationality"), and Assistant Manager Thomas Brennan had

all inflicted indignities on the former insurgents. The most rarefied gloating, though, came from the company's premier manager. An operator told the New York Tribune:[74]

> I'm glad enough to get back, but it breaks me all up when General Eckert comes in the operating room and looks around with that sarcastic smile of his and seems to say, 'Ah! you rascals, are there any more of you with whistles you want to blow?'

There was at least one consoling aspect of the month-long battle: the militancy and faithfulness of the women strikers had been exemplary, and heartening to their male co-unionists. Praise for the behavior of the "girls" was universal. But the movement that John Campbell had hopefully called "a mild sort of revolution" was over, leaving the Western Union's power intact and operator attempts to challenge that power hobbled and addled.[75]

Yet the defeat of telegrapher unionism was but one of several issues that the struggle had raised--issues bearing directly and broadly on the kind of society evolving in the late 19th century, and on the reactions of contemporary Americans to the flux and conflict shaping their era. Beyond importance in its own right, the Brotherhood strike had also created a backdrop against which the manifestations of an industrializing United States that puzzled, plagued, and haunted its citizens emerged in relief: a new kind of business enterprise so powerful and extensive as to call a continent its domain;

a complementary body of employees who wore the middle-class garb of the counting-house but who adopted the working-class activism of the shop-floor; women whom convention assigned a role of domesticity and weakness but who, compelled to earn a living, could display militant and exemplary resolve; and a clash between a faith in the sanctity of private property and the notion of a public good that could at times suggest cooperative and democratic alternatives to the rule of the market. In 1883 all these things claimed the attention and concern of Americans trying to understand and master their times. All of them are still worthy of exploration. What follows is an attempt to do so.

N O T E S

[1]Telegraphers' Advocate, Aug. 1, 1883, p. 1 (hereafter cited as TA); Journal of the Telegraph, Feb. 15, 1875, p. 3 (hereafter cited as JT); David Homer Bates, Lincoln in the Telegraph Office (New York, 1907), pp. 131, 408.

[2]TA, Aug. 1, 1883, p. 1; Boston Herald, July 20 and 23, 1883, (hereafter cited as BH); John B. Taltavall, Telegraphers of To-Day (New York, 1893), pp. 178-179; U.S., Congress, Senate, Report of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital (Washington, D.C., 1885), Vol. I, p. 911. For a somewhat different account of the July 16 meeting, see New York Herald, July 17, 1883 (hereafter cited as NYH).

The bill of grievances also covered linemen (8 hours to constitute a day's work, double pay for Sunday work, a $65 a month minimum salary with $50 a month for helpers), railroad operators (a $50 a month minimum, a $10 advance in present salaries, and an extra day's pay for Sunday work), and the operators of the automatic Wheatstone system. BH, July 16, 1883.

[3]Electric Age, June 1, 1886, p. 12 (hereafter cited as EA); Senate, Labor and Capital, I, pp. 50-51; George E. McNeill, ed., The Labor Movement: The Problem of To-Day (Boston, 1887), p. 391.

The lineman, William Sullivan, a carpenter transferred to lineman's work, was asked to perform both kinds of labor or take a pay cut. He refused, his foreman refused to replace him with an apprentice lineman, and both were then fired by their employer, the American District Telegraph Company of New York. In consequence, between 23 and 40 fellow linemen (all Brotherhood members) walked out. The Western Union evidently aided the ADT by lending linemen to help break the strike, for which John Campbell sent Eckert a letter, around July 1, decrying Western Union "interference" in the Brotherhood's dispute.

[4]The Boston incident, according to some participants interviewed, stemmed from the recent absorption of the Mutual Union Telegraph Co., by the Western Union and the subsequent glutting of the labor force of messenger boys, reducing $6-$7 a week wages to about $4. The strike involved charges of vandalism and assault by company officials; two boys were arrested and all the activists fired.

While the boys may have been inspired by contemporary Brotherhood activity, there was evidently no direct link between the two. Boston Globe, July 11 and 12, 1883 (hereafter cited as BG).

The strike rumors appeared at least as early as July 11, in a story from Pittsburgh (the national headquarters of the Brotherhood). Indeed, on the next day Boston papers carried interviews with Charles Henderson, manager of the city's main Western Union office, and an anonymous local Brotherhood officer, both of whom doubted the wisdom and probable success of a walkout--the latter, presciently, noting that midsummer, for the industry, was "the dullest season of the year." See BG, July 12, 1883; BH, July 12, 1883.

[5]New York Tribune, July 12, 1883 (hereafter cited as NYTr); BG, July 12, 1883.

The Western Union claimed that the change had been in the works "for some time" and that the new rules had been delayed for technical reasons having nothing to do with any union demands.

[6]NYTr, July 13, 14 and 15, 1883; BG, July 14, 1883. The benefits of the new rules, if any, were marginal, with branch office operators, according to one of their number, coming off best. Some operators questioned said that the changes would actually worsen their lot.

[7]The Western Union was not the only company presented with the Brotherhood demands on July 16. The others were: The Great Northwestern and the Mutual Union (both of Canada), the (American) Mutual Union, American Rapid, Baltimore and Ohio (commercial), New York American District, Postal Telegraph, Edison Electric Light Co., Brush Electric Light Co., Commercial Telegraph Co., New York Telephone Co., United States Illuminating Co., United Press Association, New York Mutual District Telegraph Co., Metropolitan Telephone Co. of New York, and the Chicago Telephone Co. The United Press, rival to the Western Union-affiliated Associated Press, accepted the petition, (TA, Aug. 1, 1883, p. 1). But the Western Union was by far the most important of the companies struck. In the early 1880's, it controlled somewhere between 70%-92% of the market. See Daniel J. Czitrom, Media and the American Mind (Chapel Hill, 1982), p. 23.

[8]NYTr, July 16, 1883; BG, July 19, 1883.

[9]Cleveland Plain Dealer, July 17, 1883 (hereafter cited as CPD); BG, July 18 and 19, 1883.

[10]BH, July 17 and 19, 1883; BG, July 19, 1883; NYTr, July 19, 1883; New York Times, July 19, 1883 (hereafter cited as NYT).

[11]NYTr, July 20, 1883; NYT, July 20, 1883; BH, July 23, 1883. See also CPD, July 19, 1883.

[12]BG, July 19, 1883; NYT, July 20, 1883; NYTr, July 20, 1883.

After the strike, the Telegraphers' Advocate claimed that Dealy had wept during the initial walkout and exclaimed, "My God! See them going. Who would have believed this?" TA, Sept. 1, 1883, p. 4.

[13]NYT, July 20, 1883; BH, July 20, 1883; CPD, July 19, 1883; Atlanta Constitution, July 20, 1883 (hereafter cited as AC). See also New Orleans Picayune, July 20, 1883 (hereafter cited as NOP).

[14]NYTr, July 20, 1883; BG, July 19 and 20, 1883; Senate, Labor and Capital, II, p. 56; Boston Evening Transcript, July 21, 1883 (hereafter cited as BET); TA, Aug. 1, 1883, p. 2.

Check-boys and check-girls were messengers within a large telegraph office who carried dispatches between the central distributing point of the operating room and the operators' desks.

[15]NYT, July 20, 1883; Senate, Labor and Capital, II, pp. 56 and 59; NOP, July 20, 1883; NYTr, July 20, 1883. See also BG, July 20, 1883.

[16]BET, July 25, 1883.

[17]NYT, July 21, 1883. See also BG, July 24, 1883, which cited the "universal" testimony of merchants, brokers, bankers and press correspondents" that Western Union's service was "seriously crippled."

[18]BG, July 21, 23 and 24, 1883; AC, July 22, 1883.

Eckert had been instrumental in Gould's assault on and entry into the telegraph industry. See especially BH, August 9, 1883; and Matthew Josephson, The Robber Barons (New York, 1934), pp. 205-206.

[19]NYT, July 22, 1883; NYTr, July 22, 1883; BG, July 24, 1883.

Twelve check-boys and clerical employees also joined at Boston, (BG, July 23, 1883). On the twenty-second, the New York Tribune reported that 84 out of 107 linemen of the Metropolitan Telephone and Telegraph Co. of New York

went out. Half the firm's stock was held by the Western Union, and its General Superintendent was named W.H. Eckert.

[20]BG, July 23 and 24, 1883; CPD, July 21, 23, 24, 25 and 27, 1883; NOP, July 23, 1883; BH, July 22, 1883; AC, July 25, 1883; NYTr, Aug. 7, 1883; NYT, July 21 and 22, 1883.

[21]Springfield Republican, July 22, 1883 (hereafter cited as SR); BH, July 22, 1883; New York Herald, July 21 and 22, 1883 (hereafter cited as NYH.

In Cleveland, two clerks and a check-boy, ("Max Handler, a poor little crippled check boy"), were fired by the Western Union for supplying the strikers with information on conditions inside the office. CPD, July 28, 1883; BH, July 28, 1883.

[22]BH, July 25, 1883; AC, July 22, 1883; CPD, July 25, 1883.

The division of labor among the Brotherhood strike committees was fourfold: Finance and Relief, Intelligence, Law and Order, and Skirmishing. NOP, July 21, 1883.

[23]CPD, July 21, 1883; NYTr, July 23, 1883; BET, July 24, 1883. See also NYT, July 20 and 24, 1883.

On July 24, two strikers were reportedly arrested for "malicious interference" with Western Union wires in Butte, Montana. BET, July 25, 1883.

[24]NYT, July 20, 21 and 23, 1883; NYTr, July 20 and 23, 1883; CPD, July 27, 1883.

"By our actions today," John Mitchell told his union brothers and sisters after the steamboat jaunt, "we have placed to our credit another key [sic] in the switchboard of public opinion." On the eve of the walkout, a Chicago Brotherhood member had told a reporter, "We cannot afford to act otherwise than as gentlemen, even were we disposed to do so." NYT, July 18, 1883.

There was even an attempt by some operators to underscore the dignified nature of the strike by coining a neologism--"contumist"--to replace the more usual (and ungenteel) term "scab." NYT, July 25, 1883.

On the operators' stress on temperance and decorum during the strike, see also NYT, July 22 and 28, 1883; NYTr, July 29, 1883; AC, July 20, 1883; BG, July 16, 1883.

[25]BG, July 23, 1883; BH, July 23, 1883; NYT, July 21, 1883; Harper's Weekly, Aug. 18, 1883; TA, Aug. 1, 1883, p. 8; NOP, Aug. 8, 1883. For public and business support for the strike, see also TA, Aug. 16,

1883, p. 6, and Sept. 1, 1883, p. 3; NYTr, Aug. 10, 1883; BG, July 18-22, and Aug. 3 and 5, 1883; SR, July 22, and Aug. 6 and 19, 1883; BET, July 20, 21 and 24, and Aug. 4 and 18, 1883; NOP, July 18 and Aug. 18, 1883; NYT, July 23, 26 and 30, 1883; Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, July 28, 1883, p. 367, and Aug. 4, 1883, p. 382; BH, July 23, 25 and 31, 1883.

[26]BG, July 19, 27 and 29, 1883; NYT, July 31 and Aug. 9, 1883.

In addition to Gould, General Eckert found a niche in the pantheon of popular villains for his role in the strike. A New Orleans Picayune correspondent sarcastically confessed that he did "not know where this hero [i.e., Eckert] won his laurels or how he gained his title," and a Boston paper rendered its judgment of Eckert's place in history by assembling this set of quotations:

"What are you going to do about it?"--Tweed.
"The public be _____."--Vanderbilt.
"Whom do you represent?"--Eckert.

See NOP, July 30, 1883; BH, July 24, 1883.

[27]NOP, Aug. 1, 1883; NYTr, July 20, 1883; Hampshire Gazette and Northampton Courier, July 24, 1883; AC, Aug. 4, 1883; BET, July 25 and Aug. 1, 1883; BG, Aug. 14, 1883. See also TA, Aug. 1, 1883, p. 4; BH, July 25 and 26, 1883; AC, Aug. 18, 1883; NYTr, July 21 and 30, 1883; BH, Aug. 14, 1883; NYT, Aug. 6, 1883; NOP, July 27 and 29, 1883; BET, July 19, 20 and 23, and Aug. 18, 1883.

On July 24, the Boston Herald reported that Eugene O'Connor threatened the hostile paper three days before with a walkout of its AP operators.

[28]BG, July 22 and 29, 1883; NYH, Aug. 3, 1883; NOP, July 28 and Aug. 2, 1883; NYT, July 24 and 27, and Aug. 9, 1883.

[29]BG, July 27 and 28, 1883; NYTr, July 23, 1883; NYT, Aug. 9, 1883.

[30]BG, Aug. 4, 1883; NYT, Aug. 9, 1883. For other benefit concerts, etc., see BG, Aug. 4 and 17, 1883; BET, July 27 and 28, 1883; NOP, July 31, 1883; NYT, August 18, 1883.

[31]NYT, July 26 and 31, 1883; BG, July 31 and Aug. 8, 1883.

[32]NYT, July 24, and Aug. 4 and 15, 1883; TA, Aug. 16, 1883, p. 1.

[33]NYT, Aug. 4, 1883; BH, Aug. 3, 1883; see also NYT, July 28 and 29, 1883. For examples of Brotherhood expectations of Knights of Labor support, see NYTr, July 18 and 19, 1883; and BG, July 14, 1883.

Despite the sanguine talk of strikers, there were hints that the union was overconfident in its financial planning. Accompanying reports of Brotherhood claims of an adequate war chest, the New York Tribune, (July 19), noted: "Some other members of the Knights of Labor deny that there is any reserve or strike fund. They say that the only means of raising money is by weekly subscriptions."

[34]NOP, July 25 and Aug. 2, 1883; CPD, Aug. 3, 1883; BG, Aug. 5 and 13, 1883; NYT, Aug. 3, 6 and 16, 1883. See also BH, Aug. 13 and 16, 1883; BG, July 19 and 29, 1883; NYT, July 31, and Aug. 6, 9 and 14, 1883.

[35]CPD, July 27, 1883. For general typographer support, see, e.g., NYT, July 22 and 30, and Aug. 6 and 12, 1883; BH, July 26 and Aug. 1, 1883; NOP, July 30 and 31, 1883; NYTr, July 27, 1883; AC, Aug. 1, 1883.

[36]BG, July 24 and 25, 1883; Life, Aug. 16, 1883, p. 81.

[37]BG, Aug. 3, 1883; AC, July 22, 1883.

[38]CPD, July 28, 1883.

[39]BET, July 27, 1883; EA, Oct. 1, 1886, p. 6.

[40]Life, Aug. 16, 1883, p. 81; BG, July 28, 1883; BET, July 28 and Aug. 27, 1883; NYT, July 28, and Aug. 2 and 15, 1883; EA, June 1, 1886, p. 12 and June 16, 1886, p. 3.

[41]BET, July 20, 1883; CPD, July 26, 1883; NYT, July 24, 1883; NOP, July 31, 1883. For the AP-Western Union nexus, see Czitrom, American Mind, pp. 23-27.

[42]BG, Aug. 1, 1883.

Of the men interviewed, though, only Field and Sage were closely involved in directing the company's fight with the operators.

[43]BG, July 26 and 31, 1883; NYT, July 26, 1883.

On the thirty-first, the Globe had Brotherhood officials saying that the settlement reflected the demands in the bill of grievances, and that if the settlements reached with the Western Union proved more favorable, the

American Rapid would adjust the terms to match the gains won by the operators. But on August 9, the terms were made public, and while close to the original demands, provided for only about half the salary hike in the bill, and only applied to first-class offices of the company. See CPD, Aug. 11, 1883; NYT, Aug. 10, 1883.

[44]EA, July 1, 1886, p. 9; BG, July 31, 1883.

[45]BG, July 21 and 31, 1883.

[46]BH, July 30 and Aug. 1, 1883; BET, Aug. 1, 1883; BG, Aug. 1, 1883.

Deserters, as at the Boston meeting, were formally expelled.

Eugene O'Connor asserted that the Western Union had successfully used the stampede tactic to defeat the telegraphers' strike of 1870.

[47]NYT, Aug. 1 and 2, 1883. See also BG, Aug. 2, 1883.

The relatively small proportion of women operators who claimed strike pay was noted by more than one observer. See NYTr, Aug. 3 and 14, 1883; NYT, Aug. 1 and 2, 1883.

[48]BG, July 22, and Aug. 1, 2 and 12, 1883; BH, July 31 and Aug. 5, 1883. See also NYTr, July 18 and 19, 1883; CPD, July 25, 1883.

One Boston striker told the Herald "that he considered the fight as good as lost," said the Brotherhood's funds were inadequate, and that "many misrepresentations in that direction [had] been made." BH, Aug. 3, 1883.

For complaints from Houston of financial need in July, see NOP, July 26, 1883.

[49]NYT, Aug. 4, 1883; Terence V. Powderly (hereafter cited as TVP) to "Bob," Aug. 6 and 8, 1883, in Powderly Papers (microfilm of collection at Catholic University; hereafter cited as PP).

[50]BG, Aug. 2, 1883.

There were, at about the same time, continuing reports of poor service. See, e.g., NOP, July 29, 1883; BG, July 31 and Aug. 3, 1883.

[51]BG, Aug. 6 and 7, 1883; BET, Aug. 6, 1883; NYTr, Aug. 7, 1883; NYT, Aug. 6 and 7, 1883.

[52]BG, Aug. 9, 10 and 15, 1883; NOP, Aug. 8 and 12, 1883.

[53]BG, Aug. 7 and 8, 1883; NYTr, Aug. 1, 11 and 12, 1883.

On August 4, the Tribune carried a story that "an active crusade" by linemen in New York City was in the offing to convince homeowners over whose roofs Western Union wires passed to withdraw their permission for such rights of way and allow the linemen to "legally disable" the circuits in question.

[54]The Boston Herald, (July 22), mentioned a threatening note to a nonstriking lineman to join the walkout "for your own safety," and also talk of wire cutting; on the thirtieth, the Globe reported an incident in which a Boston railroad telegrapher, a Mrs. Staniford, was allegedly "bulldozed" by Brotherhood members and pressured to join the strike. See also, BH, Aug. 11, 1883.

[55]NYTr, Aug. 7, 1883.

[56]NYT, Aug. 8, 1883; NYTr, Aug. 8, 1883; BET, Aug. 8, 1883; NOP, Aug. 16 and 17, 1883. See also NYT, Aug. 17, 1883; BH, Aug. 20, 1883; NYTr, Aug. 10, 1883.

[57]BG, Aug. 15 and 17, 1883; Senate, Labor and Capital, I, p. 1080.

For continuing public support during the latter part of the strike and beyond, see, e.g., Senate, Labor and Capital, I, p. 891; BG, Aug. 3, 5, 7 and 17, 1883; NYT, Aug. 3, 4, 9, 14, 15 and 18, 1883; NOP, Aug. 18, 1883; CPD, Aug. 9, 1883.

[58]BG, Aug. 10, 1883; TA, Sept. 1, 1883, p. 6.

[59]BH, Aug. 3, 1883; NYT, Aug. 11, 12 and 15, 1883; BG, Aug. 17, 1883. See also BG, Aug. 4, 1883; NOP, Aug. 5 and 12, 1883; AC, Aug. 11 and 17, 1883.

For denials of a Brotherhood decline, see BG, Aug. 4, 9 and 11, 1883; BET, Aug. 11, 1883; CPD, Aug. 15, 1883; BH, Aug. 13, 1883.

For rumors that Eckert would resign (and thus facilitate a settlement with the Brotherhood), see BG, Aug. 4 and 12, 1883.

[60]TA, Aug. 16, 1883, p. 4.

[61]NYT, Aug. 16, 1883, BG, Aug. 16, 1883; NYTr, Aug. 16, 1883.

The committee comprised Master Workman Charles E. Chute (Boston), Master Workman C.L. Laverty (Philadelphia), and Thomas O'Reilly, William Taylor, and lineman B.F. Kitchen, all of New York.

[62]BG, Aug. 18, 1883.

[63]NOP, Aug. 18, 1883; BG, Aug. 19, 1883. See also TA, Sept. 1, 1883, p. 7.

[64]NYT, Aug. 15, 1883; BG, July 19, 1883; AC, July 24, 1883; BET, July 23 and Aug. 18, 1883.

As early as July 12, the Boston Herald quoted a Hub Brotherhood spokesman who warned that the summer season would weaken the strikers' potential for victory.

[65]Indeed, the criticism of the Brotherhood's strategy predated the collapse by almost a week. NYT, Aug. 11, 1883; BH, Aug. 11, 1883. See also BG, July 24, 1883, for an outline of the strike callout sequence.

[66]TA, Sept. 1, 1883, p. 6; BG, Aug. 21, 1883. See also BG, Aug. 16, 1883.

[67]NYTr, Aug. 21, 1883; BH, July 23, 1883; NYT, Aug. 18, 1883; BG, Aug. 18 and 19, 1883. See also NOP, Aug. 18, 1883.

[68]NYT, Aug. 17, 1883; BG, Aug. 18, 1883; NOP, Aug. 19, 1883; BH, Aug. 19, 1883. See also TA, Aug. 16, 1883, p. 4; NYT, Aug. 19, 1883; AC, Aug. 23, 1883; BET, Aug. 18, 1883, BG, Aug. 18 and 19, 1883.

For intimations of this sentiment before the strike's failure, see BH, Aug. 12, 1883.

[69]TA, Sept. 1, 1883, pp. 4, 8.

[70]CPD, Aug. 22, 1883; NYT, Aug. 20, 1883; McClelland to R.D. Layton, Aug. 22, 1883 as quoted in EA, July 1, 1886, p. 16. See also, TA, Sept. 1, 1883, p. 6; BG, Aug. 22, 1883.

For a skeptical Knight's view of the strike in its first week, see NYTr, July 24, 1883.

[71]McNeill, Labor Movement, p. 392; BG, Aug. 21, 1883.

[72]Later estimates of the number of operators who quit or were not taken back are 150 according to one source, and the more vague figure of one-eighth of those who struck, according to a second informant. See Vidkunn Ulriksson, The Telegraphers: Their Craft and Their Unions (Washington, D.C., 1953), p. 50; EA, Aug. 16, 1886, p. 16.

Some vowed to quit telegraphy rather than return defeated, including strike leaders such as Eugene O'Connor, who would in any case have been persona non grata with Western Union. See NYT, Aug. 18, 1883; BET, Aug. 18, 1883.

On Aug. 18, the Boston Globe reported that all returning strikers would receive an automatic $5-$10 reduction in their pre-strike salaries.

[73]BG, Aug. 19 and 21, 1883; NYTr, Aug. 23, 1883.
But there was evidently much resistance--overt and covert--to the ironclad requirement for rehiring. The Globe had one operator tell a manager, "I'll sign the document as a matter of form, but if the brotherhood should order us out again tomorrow, I would leave my key promptly." There were similar sentiments at New York.
When Samuel Gompers reappeared before the Senate Education and Labor Committee hearings on August 27, he denounced the Western Union ironclad tactic before the investigating legislators. Senate, Labor and Capital, I, pp. 685-686.

[74]TA, Sept. 1, 1883, pp. 5, 8, 9; NYTr, Aug. 23, 1883.

[75]For an institutional history of subsequent telegrapher unionism, see Ulriksson, Telegraphers, chapters 5-16.

C H A P T E R I I

Anatomy of an Industry

Our Fathers gave us liberty, but little did
    they dream,
The grand results that flow along this mighty
    age of steam;
For our mountains, lakes and rivers, are all
    a blaze of fire,
And we send our news by lightning, on the
    telegraphic wire.

"Uncle Sam's Farm," popular
song ca. 1860

In the great transformation of the United States in the 19th century, the railroad and the telegraph were in the vanguard, twin enterprises growing up together and in their turn fathering the corporate economy that would come to dominate the next hundred years. "Industry" seems somehow inappropriate for telegraphy, with its fragile, slender poles and wires and its small and intricate plant; more fitting that the railroads take that description, with their complement of puffing, muscular locomotives and their voracious consumption of steel and iron, coal and wood, land and men. But the images are deceptive. The capitalist industrial revolution of the postbellum years, Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., has convincingly shown, was one of economies of <u>speed</u> as much as of scale, and in that the telegraph, like the railway, was indispensable. Wire and rail--often sharing the same right-of-way--knit an efficient national market, economically consummating

what had politically begun in 1789. Of equal significance, the telegraph and railroad companies, Chandler writes, "were themselves the first modern business enterprises to appear in the United States." It seems richly symbolic that the establishment of four standard time zones across the continent and a nationwide telegraph strike should have both occurred in 1883.[1]

Complementary partners recasting an atomized, agrarian republic into an integrated industrial one, railroad and telegraph companies evolved in quite similar fashion. Both traced a pattern of many small, competitive firms giving way to fewer, larger, and more stable ones. The nature of the telegraph was such, in fact, that the pace and extent of wire consolidation well outdistanced that of the nation's steam roads. No railway, or consortium of railways, ever approached the stature of a Western Union.[2]

But nothing like a Western Union existed in the infant days of the telegraph industry. After the initial Morse experiments and an aborted government interest in the new medium, the initiative fell to private enterprise. In the decade or so following the mid-1840s, venturesome businessmen and speculators such as Andrew Jackson's ex-Postmaster General Amos Kendall, Henry O'Rielly, Ezra Cornell, Cyrus W. Field, Peter Cooper, Hiram Sibley, and others lent their capital and commercial acumen in the race

for markets and profits. This first flush of telegraph promotion produced lines many of whose hurried and shoddy construction often mirrored equally rickety finances, and which devoted a good deal of their time and effort to rate wars and patent squabbles. Wasteful of human and material resources, this "reckless expansion" had, nonetheless, by the mid-1850s, planted a rudimentary telegraphic grid across the Northeast and Midwest.[3]

But the cost was terrible and the surviving firms, bloodied and sobered, sought peace and stability. They found it in 1857 in a pooling arrangement dubbed the "Treaty of the Six Nations," in which a half-dozen of the major companies (including the recently-incorporated Western Union) carved up a vast market encompassing the eastern United States as far west as Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana. The Treaty prescribed mutual aid and respect for spheres of influence, and also bound the signatories to ruthlessly eliminate or absorb any new competition. But pools among telegraph capitalists proved no more durable than those that their railroading brothers fashioned. By the 1860s, the pact had withered, and the Western Union and its principal rival, the American Telegraph Company, battled to dominate the field. One year after Appomattox, the American yielded, and as it had to so many weaker firms since its beginnings (as the New York and Mississippi Valley Printing Telegraph

Company, in 1851), the Western Union engulfed its most recent victim. It was not the only remaining telegraph company in America, but it was already by far the most important and powerful.[4]

The clash of raw market forces had much to do with the molding of the new communications giant, but so did the public purse. Eight years before locomotives from east and west touched cowcatchers at Promontory Point, Utah, the Western Union and an amalgam of California companies had completed a transcontinental line under the aegis of the 1860 Pacific Telegraph Act. The Act promised the companies up to $40,000 per year in government subsidies, in consideration for which the companies would carry official business. Like the contemporary grants to railroads, the Pacific Telegraph Act encouraged the kind of financial easy virtue that marked quasi-public enterprise in the years of the Great Barbecue. The Act made it possible for east and west coasts to talk to each other by wire, but it also redistributed some of the nation's wealth to a small number of resourceful, if not entirely honest, telegraph promoters. The Civil War, too, was kind to the Western Union. It stimulated telegraphic business in general, of course, but it also enlarged the company's wire and cable network by over 14,000 miles of government-built military lines in 1866. The official reason for the transfer--that the state was only rightly

restoring private property commandeered or destroyed by wartime necessity--lost some of its cogency when it was learned that the gift of wire and poles went either to the Western Union or to firms it was on the verge of absorbing, and that General Thomas T. Eckert, late Assistant Secretary of War, was assuming a high managerial post with that same fortunate corporation.[5]

Despite near-monopoly status early in its career, the Western Union was never free from competition of some sort in the postbellum years, ranging from the pin-pricks of small firms to more serious bouts with larger concerns or consortia. As late as 1878, one writer counted some 132 companies co-existing with the Western Union, most of them of the small, local, entrepreneurial kind that typified telegraphy in its first years. Among them, to be sure, were scattered enterprises of substance -- the Central Pacific (142 offices, 212 employees, 4,904 miles of wire), the Montreal Telegraph Co. (1,507 offices, 2,337 employees, 20,479 miles of wire), the Baltimore and Ohio (136 offices, 341 employees, 1,409 miles of wire), or the Atlantic and Pacific (528 offices, 794 employees, 22,243 miles of wire), for example, often ancillaries of a railroad system. But more representative of the mass of companies were such as the New Jersey Midland (19 offices, 19 employees, 160 miles of wire), the Troy and Union Springs (5 offices, 5 employees, 30 miles of wire), the Snohomish Telegraph Company (3 offices, 3 employees, 14 miles of wire), or the

South Hadley Falls (2 offices, 2 employees, 1 mile of wire). And peering down on all of these--with 7,672 offices, 12,224 employees, and 199,022 miles of wire--stood the Western Union.[6]

The Western Union's growing scope and power, resting in part on government generosity and the sheer weight of concentrated capital, was also due to advantageous leasing and franchise arrangements, most especially those with railroads. The roads needed fast and reliable communication, both on and beyond their systems; the telegraph giant sought rights-of-way easily and quickly accessible to repair crews (unlike those that meandered along bumpy rural highways or through forest, field, and swamp), and cheap operator labor and office facilities. Both enterprises satisfied their needs through the franchise agreements. "By a division of expenses, and a joint use of line and offices," the Boston Herald explained in 1883, "vast areas of country are made tributary at a very small expense to the revenues of the telegraph company, while the low cost of maintenance of the lines on roads so frequently traversed, and under constant surveillance, is an advantage that is obvious." It was certainly obvious to Jay Gould. "That arrangement," he told inquiring senators that same year, "has given the Western Union a hold upon an immense system which it could not have got in any other way. For instance, today take our 25,000 operators

in the Western Union system, if we payed them all salaries . . . the gross earnings of the telegraph business would not pay that expense alone, the salary roll, to say nothing of the maintenance of the lines."[7] Besides the railway links, the company profitably leased private wires to bankers, brokers, and other businessmen, and it further bolstered its market position through press contracts, particularly by its intimate ties with the Associated Press.[8]

Thus fortified, the Western Union prospered in the Gilded Age. Between 1870 and 1890, corporate profits, in nominal dollars, rose some 215% from around $1.9 million to $6 million; but adjusted for deflation, the company's profits had actually shot up from $1.4 million to $7.4 million, a dizzying climb of 428%.[9] The number of offices multiplied too: 3,972 in 1870, 9,077 in 1880, and, by 1890, 19,382 of them.[10]

But accompanying this impressive expansion and accumulation were spurts of competition and rate-cutting, stock-jobbing, and mergers, all intertwined with the jarring rhythms of boom and bust. Even though the Western Union made money through the lean 1870s, its profit rate wavered and did not reach a 6% plateau until the tail end of the decade. This newfound stability, lasting through 1883, then eroded as the rate slid down to 3%, again recovering in the late 80s and achieving a kind of rough

stasis, at around 4%, through the 1890s. Dividend declarations, at least from 1873 on, were evidently never suspended, and their yearly fluctuation followed a path similar to that of profit rates over the same 20-year span. Three times (1875, 1884, and 1885) dividends paid out exceeded net income, and in nine instances (1886, 1888, 1894-1900) the dividends declared covered 90% or more of the year's net earnings.[11]

Behind these numbers, in part, were challenges to the Western Union from ambitious rivals. In 1871, the independent Telegrapher's editor welcomed the appearance of a pool of Western Union competitors and hopefully predicted that they would provide a "reasonable and proper" contest in the field that would both serve the public through lowered rates and prevent a recourse to government ownership of the medium. The pool's threat passed, but a new and much more serious one surfaced in the late 1870s and early 80s, when Jay Gould turned his attention to telegraphy and assaulted its most prominent institution with his own companies. By 1881 he had effected a merger and, armed with 90,000 shares, wrested a seat on the Western Union's board of directors. But neither Gould nor his newly-wrought wire empire was immune from the play of market forces. After thrashing the operators in the summer of 1883, the company found itself beset by a number of smaller, though scrappy, firms--the Baltimore

and Ohio, the American Rapid, the Bankers' and Merchants', and the (privately owned) Postal Telegraph Company--that commenced a sharp rate war lasting into 1888. That year, a humbled B & O joined the Western Union network, and the American Rapid succumbed in 1894. In terms of strictly telegraphic competition, the Western Union, by the late 80s, had survived the worst.[12]

Yet more than dispassionate invisible hands were guiding the pens entering profit figures in the Western Union's ledger books. Stock-watering and manipulation were as much a part of the industry as poles, relays, and insulators. Financial legerdemain at the Western Union under the Gould regime was noteworthy, but hardly revolutionary, since telegraphy had an inveterate reputation for assembling waterlogged corporate structures, and no corporation more so than the Western Union. Critics of the great monopoly frequently charged that to maintain dividend payments on grossly watered stock it made up the difference by cutting its employees' wages and overcharging the public. In the wake of the 1881 Gould coup, the venerable Commercial and Financial Chronicle indicted the merger and subsequent $80 million recapitalization as "another immense stock-watering upon which the people must pay dividends," and other businessmen repeated the allegations during the 1883 strike.[13]

Shady corporate practices may well have been conducted

at the operators' expense in the form of speed-ups and pay reductions. Whether the company resorted to the former is uncertain, but falling salary rates--in nominal dollars--were a feature of the 1870s and 1880s.[14] The notorious "sliding scale" of graduated cuts dating from early 1876 was such an "economy" move, as was the practice of filling vacant positions at $5 or $10 less than the previous occupant had been getting.[15] Corporate consolidation also hurt operators by tightening the job market through eliminating duplicate facilities, at least through the mid-1880s; the Western Union-B & O merger of 1888, according to initial accounts, may not have resulted in such extensive layoffs. But like other employees, operators were ultimately at the mercy of the market's drift. "The very general suspension of telegraphic extension," observed the Telegrapher during the punishing slump of the mid-70s, "has lessened the usual increase of demand for such [operators'] labor, while until recently, there has been little, if any, decrease in the number of those who are entering telegraphic ranks."[16]

If operators suffered from the vagaries of the business cycle, the Western Union survived intact, and frankly celebrated its virtual monopoly as both economically natural and a public good. "Notwithstanding the clamor in regard to telegraphic monopoly," the firm's house organ declared in 1881, "it is the result of an

inevitable law that the business shall be mainly conducted under one great organization," for, the editorial explained, competition hindered rather than promoted progress in the field. The argument that a nationally-integrated communications network was a rational and efficient way to bind the country was of itself convincing; what some critics of the Western Union questioned was whether an "inevitable law" decreed that such an eminently public medium be based on private control and profit.[17]

The fact that the company assumed functions more appropriate to a nation-state than a body of investors bespoke its unique reach, power, and physiognomy. By 1883, 80% of the country's message traffic pulsed along Western Union wires connecting some 12,386 offices. At the same time, perhaps 20-25,000 persons worked directly or indirectly for the firm, 10-12,000 of whom President Norvin Green estimated to be operators. Most Western Union operators were in fact employees of the hundreds of railroads with which the company had its lucrative franchise contracts. Western Union operators proper--3,629 of them by one tally a month before the Great Strike--only made up about one-third of all those sending and receiving the company's business. Likewise, close to 80% of all the Western Union offices were actually local railway depots which, under the same franchise system, performed double duty as both train stations and commercial telegraph

facilities. But the Western Union's farming out of work to the railroads, rather than fostering weakness and dependence, increased the weight and breadth of its corporate empire.[18]

At the apex of this huge enterprise sat a board of directors that included some of the best known and most hated businessmen in America. Jay Gould was foremost among these, of course, having stormed his way into the boardroom in 1881, and his son George occupied a seat as well. The west-coast robber baron and Central Pacific Railroad president Collis P. Huntington joined the Goulds at the board table, as did Union Pacific Railroad directors Sidney Dillon, Russell Sage, and Cyrus W. Field (of Atlantic cable fame), and a Kentucky gentleman named Norvin Green who had spent 14 years as a country doctor "traveling about on horseback, with a pair of saddle-bags, over a pretty rough country," before turning his talents to patronage politics and then telegraph promotion. In evidence, too, were the New York Central Railroad corporate lawyer and Vanderbilt deputy Chauncey M. Depew and the dour visage of investment banker J. Pierpont Morgan. And there was the Western Union's Vice-President and General Manager, Thomas T. Eckert.[19]

Eckert actually dwelled in two worlds: that of director and company officer (and presumably stockholder), and that of professional manager and technician. He was

of that first generation that guided the industry through its initial phase of competition and concentration in the 20 years or so leading up to the Civil War. In turn operator (and postmaster) at Wooster, Ohio in the late 1840s, superintendent of a railway telegraph in the '50s, gold mine manager, chief of the U.S. Military Telegraphs under Lincoln, Assistant Secretary of War under Edwin Stanton, and then senior manager in the Western Union and its rivals, Eckert, by the mid-1880s, was considered a Gould lieutenant. His influence and remarkable success were atypical, but his role in the new stratum of manager-specialists was not.[20] A bit behind Eckert came a second generation of telegraph men who, although too young to have known the rough-and-tumble of the industry's teething period--days when promoter Ezra Cornell and his son Alonzo sweated and cut poles alongside their laborers in the woods of upstate New York--were still old enough to have entered the craft during its mid-century boom years. Beginning as messengers and operators in the 1850s and 60s, many would be the managers of the Western Union in the decade of the Great Strike. Many were also alumni of the military telegraph service. Col. Robert C. Clowry received his honorific in the same way that General Eckert had, and men such as David Homer Bates, Albert Brown Chandler, Charles A. Tinker, and William J. Dealy had all worked government keys during the Civil War.[21]

The military association with the growing telegraph business was more than a matter of historical accident. Because the telegraph, like the railroad, was a form of capitalist enterprise so unlike the traditional small-scale one of workshop or merchant's office, as Harold C. Livesay insightfully notes, there was but one model that could bring rational structure, hierarchy, and discipline to the new corporate giants, and that was the military one.[22] It is not surprising, then, that the three great territorial blocks of the Western Union in 1883 (Eastern, Western or Central, and Southern) were dubbed "Divisions," or that company directives came down as "special orders" and "general orders," or that operators in larger offices were grouped into "squads," uniformed messenger boys called by number and drilled under "sergeants," or that the house organ listed monthly appointments, transfers, resignations, and dismissals under the heading, "The Service."[23] Not that the firm's organization was purely a transposed military one. Long before he was called General Eckert, the Western Union's top manager was building and running telegraph lines; that, indeed, was why he had been commissioned. What was likely at work was a kind of managerial dialectic: the army had things to offer those interested in corporate empire building, but telegraphy and railroading, of necessity, themselves spurred managerial innovation. The two fed off of, and

influenced, each other.[24]

Beneath the company officers and senior managers spread a pyramid of employees, telegraphic plant, and offices. The latter included thousands of small-town railroad depots, but an urban spectrum too, running from branch-office cubby holes to multi-storied edifices. In 1883, by the Western Union's own account, it maintained 39 "principal main offices" across the nation, but even this category obscured considerable differences among individual facilities. The New York headquarters at 195 Broadway, with 444 telegraphers on its payroll, was unmatched even by its relatively big counterparts at Chicago (83 operators), Boston (96), St. Louis (88), or Philadelphia (80). And the same nominal class of office also represented such places as Kansas City (56), Detroit (41), San Francisco (28), Oil City, Pennsylvania (18), and Memphis (13).[25]

Despite this variation, the city offices had much in common. The operating room contained banks of instrument tables at which each telegrapher, separated from his or her neighbor by sound-deadening glass-and-wood partitions about a foot high, sent and received. Message blanks entered the operating room from a separate receiving department via pneumatic tubes or dumbwaiters. Thence they continued, in the youthful hands of the distributing clerks popularly called check-boys and check-girls, until

they reached the appropriate operator's desk. This was the milieu in which city-based telegraphers often spent their 9½-hour day and 7½-hour night shifts.[26]

The more elaborate wire centers even boasted company-run restaurants where employees could spend their half-hour dinner break eating fare running the gamut from crackers and milk to roast lamb with mint sauce. Not everyone was pleased with the lunchrooms or the big offices. "One of the Girls" in New York complained in 1875 of the restaurant's clatter, slow service, and consequent "scalding our mouths and burning our throats to get through within the allotted time," and went on to condemn prices for the meals that, "unless we contented ourselves with living upon soup and a piece of pie," were too steep.[27] There were other things to find fault with in a metropolitan office: poor quality paper, uncomfortable chairs, and, much more seriously, unhealthful conditions. A Philadelphia operator told the Telegrapher's readers in 1870 of the temperature extremes in the Pacific & Atlantic office that had brought illness and death to some of his colleagues. Sixteen years later, editor John B. Taltavall of the Electric Age, referred to the main operating room at 195 Broadway as "that consumption breeder." Hale's Honey of Horehound and Tar, a patent medicine of the 1880s, played on such fears when its full-page advertisements solemnly warned operators--"ESPECIALLY THOSE IN

LARGE CITIES"--that more than any other, their calling made them prone to consumption. Nor was this merely self-serving commercial hyperbole. The Western Union-sponsored Telegraphers' Mutual Benefit Association reported in 1876 that "the confining indoor life of telegraphers" made them "particularly liable" to fall victim to the dread disease.[28]

The numerous small offices that complemented the large ones in the telegraphic network could be equally unpleasant. Nattie Rogers, the fictional young mistress of an urban branch office in the late 1870s, catalogued her domain as "a long, dark little room, into which the sun never shines, a crazy wooden chair, and a high stool, desk, instruments--that is all--Oh! and me!" The saccharine 1881 verses of "The Telegraph Operator" limned a similarly unflattering sketch of a kindred office, beginning:[29]

> She sits within her narrow cell,
> A jewell worth a fairer setting.

Cells or not, branch offices in city and country made up the bulk of telegraph facilities for the public. In hotels, at steamship piers, mercantile establishments, stockyards, exposition grounds, political conventions, and, especially railway depots, thousands of operators, usually alone, and often young women, serviced the great communications system of the Western Union.[30] Salaries were notoriously low. Perhaps that was why O.S. Denise, a Chicago telegrapher of the 1870s, combined the hotel branch office he managed

with his own cigar store-cum-newstand. But few branch operators could supplement their salaries with such entrepreneurship, and their salaries--an 1883 report from Brooklyn mentioned the average for the city as $35 a month--often needed supplementing.[31] Hours could be brutally long, too, particularly in the ubiquitous railroad way stations that as late as the mid-1890s accounted for about 75% of all telegraph offices. Forced to wear many hats as both railway and telegraph functionaries, rural operators working 12 or even 15-hour days were apparently common.[32]

Like its offices, the Western Union's employees were ranked and specialized. Besides operators, the company comprised a myriad of blue and white-collar labor: clerks and bookkeepers, messengers, battery men, construction workers and foremen, skilled mechanics in company-owned workshops, and the indispensable linemen.[33] Office hierarchies descended from managers to chief operators (the latter roughly analagous to foremen and forewomen), under whom, finally, worked the "squads" of telegraphers. Some chiefs specialized. A wire chief, for example, supervised circuits, ferreting out the various breaks in the line--"grounds," "crosses," and "escapes"--that interrupted service. The stature and responsibility of a chief (or manager) varied with the particular office. The modest little Western Union facility at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania had Chief Operator R.B. Zeigler monitoring

the work of seven subordinates in 1883, while his counterparts at 195 Broadway each kept watch over 18 to 25 telegraphers.[34]

Operators, too, were stratified and subdivided according to skill and specialty. The aristocrats among them were the press operators, men who combined speed, accuracy, and stamina in sending and receiving the copy that filled the nation's newspapers. Their salaries were commensurate with their great ability and small numbers. John Taltavall, who until co-editing the Telegrapher's Advocate had been an Associated Press operator in New York, told a Senate inquiry in 1883 that his fellow AP men could command from $110 to $170 a month--at a time when male operators probably averaged around $70. High pay and high skill also meant high status. "After working all day I worked at the office nights as well," Thomas Edison recalled of his days as a young country telegrapher in the Michigan of the 1860s, "for the reason that 'press report' came over one of the wires until 3 A.M., and I would cut in and copy it as well as I could, to become more rapidly proficient. The goal of the rural telegraph operator was to be able to take press."[35]

Less exalted than the elite of press men, but still masters of their craft, were first-class operators. There were evidently no corporate grading criteria defining a "first-class" or "second-class" operator (indeed, this

official ambiguity, and charges of arbitrary promotions, favoritism, and irrational and unfair personnel policies generally were frequent complaints against the Western Union),[36] but there was a rough consensus, at least among telegraphers, about what made one "first class." Speed was of primary importance. Operators of the first rank were expected to send or receive around 40 words per minute. Mistakes, called "bulls," were anathema, as was "breaking" a circuit while receiving to ask the transmitting operator to stop and repeat a word. Neat and clear handwriting that transcribed the message as the ear received it was equally necessary. Nor was that all. H.S. Smith, formerly chief operator in the Western Union's Detroit office, described this bit of shop-floor gymnastics:[37]

> While transmitting it he [the operator] puts on the number of the message between the . . . offices, the call for the office, the time sent, his own private signature, and the private signature of the receiving operator. In most cases that is done with the left hand, where operators are expert enough to do it. As a general thing, on all large wires, where there is a large amount of business handled, the operators are expert enough to do so; in smaller offices they are sometimes not.

It was in those smaller branch and railway offices, or in the "City Line" departments of urban complexes such as 195 Broadway, that the second-class telegraphers plied their trade. "Second-class or inferior operators," a Cleveland Brotherhood press release during the Great

Strike explained, "have charge of one or more 'way' wires. Way wires are those which run through small towns from which the volume of business is not large." Many second-class operators, for social and economic reasons rather than biological ones, were female. The second-class niche was often an occupational dead-end, but it could also be a period of apprenticeship in which young operators honed and refined the skills of hand and ear, and then followed the way-wires and trunk lines to the promise of the big city.[38]

The significant differences in ability, work milieu, and status that separated first and second-class operators should not obscure what these men and women held in common as telegraphers: knowledge of a coded alphabet and the mental and physical dexterity needed to send and receive the code with some speed. They were all Morse operators, and Morse telegraphy was a skilled and labor-intensive affair. Not all wire traffic was. Throughout the Gilded Age, inventors produced a variety of automatic telegraph devices meant to convey messages at super-human pace and volume, and to do so using semi-skilled labor--often that of "girls." Daniel H. Craig, in whose automatic apparatus the hopes and capital of the American Rapid Telegraph Company lay, told investigating senators in 1883 that

> This is girl's labor, and is accomplished by a

> piano-shaped key-board, which is operated with as much ease and rapidity as a piano key-board. It taxes the mind scarcely more than reading, at a speed of 35 to 50 words per minute, and the proper handling of the perforating machine can be acquired in one or two months.

And the system would dramatically cut labor costs. Craig calculated that by using 23 low-paid "girls" rather than 36 first-class Morse operators, salary expenses would shrink from $3,060 to $760 a month. The implications of such technological advances were not lost on Western Union officials. As early as 1869, the company's Journal of the Telegraph, discussing strikes, warned its operator-readers that a walkout "stimulates invention to make labor unnecessary, or revenge for interference."[39] But automatic telegraphy in the postbellum era never delivered on its promises. Although some systems, especially the British-developed Wheatstone, had limited successful use, the automatics, despite their cheap labor and nominal speed, never bested the hand-operated Morse telegraph for accuracy and dispatch. Telegraphy would eventually be automated (and feminized), beginning around World War I, with the perfection of the teletypewriter. But in the late 19th century, it remained a skilled craft.[40]

The false starts of automatic systems did not mean an absence of technological breakthroughs. On the contrary, two such innovations--the duplex and quadruplex--profoundly affected the industry and its operators.

Introduced in 1872, the duplex made possible the simultaneous transmission, in opposite directions, of two messages over a single wire that had previously allowed but one to pass. Thomas Edison's quadruplex of 1874 simply doubled the capacity of the duplex; now four messages shared the same line and two-way flow. The economic impact of these inventions is hard to exaggerate. "It costs a telegraph company, which has a long line constructed and in use," the Western Union's house organ explained in 1870, "as much to send a message 50 miles as to send it 500 miles. For while the message is in transmission, no other message can be sent; consequently, all the operators are unavailable although being paid." But the duplex and quadruplex did away with this idling of labor and plant, increasing the productivity of the latter substantially. Duplexing or quadruplexing a line added "phantom" wires to the Western Union system: in 1883, the company's mileage, 436,548, consisted of 327,000 miles of actual wire and an additional 109,548 miles (25% of the total) of "phantom" line that the multiplex systems created.[41]

With the theoretical potential for boosting traffic volume up to 400%, the pressure for increased productivity now shifted from capital to labor. And here the advantage of the quadruplex lost some of its edge, for in order to work at maximum capacity and keep eight operators busy, none of the receivers could "break," or open the circuit

to have a word repeated; if one did, all traffic on the line halted. "The Quadruplex system," a contemporary student wrote, "acts as a police by driving the operators up to their work. No man can loiter over his key while seven others are watching him."[42] Intended or not, the introduction of the "quad" was in effect a speed-up. From about 1872 to 1882, average costs per message (in constant dollars) for the Western Union steadily declined. Competition and salary cuts may have had something to do with this, but so, too, may increased productivity of the corporation's plant and, through the ensuing speed-up that multiplexing induced, the increased productivity of its operators.[43] When things went well, "quad" men and women were productive indeed. On the eve of the Great Strike, the three quad wires connecting Boston and New York, the Boston Globe reported, served as a conduit for almost 3,000 messages a day, while the non-quad heavy circuits could only claim an average of 300 to 1,000 telegrams in the same period.[44]

Developments such as the quadruplex touched on the essence of the revolution that telegraphy and the railways were propelling. The high-volume flow, centralization, and thoroughgoing rationalization of a Western Union simultaneously shaped and mirrored the new economic order coalescing in the era. It is hard, a jaded century later, to appreciate how truly miraculous it must have seemed to

someone accustomed to gauging speed by the gait of an ambling wagon or, at the outside, the intoxicating 50 miles per hour of an express train, to place a telegram on the receiving counter at 195 Broadway in New York and know that two to ten minutes later it would appear in Philadelphia.[45] And this was all possible in part because telegraphy, despite its unique form and function, had a distinctly "industrial" cast. "Busy as it is," Harper's Magazine noted of the Postal Company's operating room in 1896, "the work presents no confusion and but little noise, for a great telegraph office is one of the best examples of modern industrial organization." With its continuous-flow "production," its messenger force rationalized to the point of individuals being called by number rather than name, the large telegraph office, mutatis mutandis, was very much a shop floor, subject to the same economic imperatives as a steel mill or slaughterhouse. Convinced in 1887 that the nimble feet of check-boys and girls at Western Union headquarters might be improved upon to expand the volume of traffic, the firm installed an overhead carrier system (like those used to convey cash in contemporary department stores) to increase the young clerks' efficiency. Even the company-run lunchrooms had more than paternalism behind them. "By these lunch rooms," pioneer manager and Western Union publicist James D. Reid wrote, "a vast amount of time is saved to the

company," and another description of the same facilities explained in greater detail that the company had "found by experience that it is cheaper to provide the noonday meal, and thus control the time of those employed at this hour of the day than to permit them to go outside of the building to the neighboring restaurants."[46]

Disciplining the operators' dinnertime habits was not, after all, so far removed from disciplining their worktime ones in the managerial calculus of efficiency and profit. And shop-floor discipline there was--keys, sounders, and white collars notwithstanding--that any millhand would have found familiar. A chief operator, no less than a foreman, embodied constraint and compulsion in the daily world of work. "At your work you must ever take good care," advised a facetious set of "The Rules of '197'" in an operators' journal of the mid-1870s,[47]

> To watch for that grim chief operataire,
> Who has gimlet eyes which are everywhere,
> And cover each man with a ghastly stare.
> Nor must you ever wildly stare
> To gaze on the ladies over there,
> For if you do, you may safely swear
> You'll get reported and "bounced" then and there.
> Work, brothers, work with care,
> 'Neath the eagle eye of the chief operataire!

The parallel with industrial workers of the more usual sort must not be pressed too far. The operators and the enterprise for which they worked were in many ways in a class by themselves. At a time when most of the labor force carried grease, soil, or coal dust under its

fingernails, the hands of telegraphers, if stained at all, were stained with ink.

But operators were dependent employees, too, and their place in an industrial hierarchy and setting would mold their outlook and actions--for many of them, to the extent of collective action against their massive employer in 1883 and a fleeting alliance with a broad working-class movement. Yet outlook and actions took their shape from more than one source. The new corporate, industrial world that the Western Union represented left a deep imprint on the telegraphers, but they also bore the stamp of their origins, their aspirations, and their self-image. Where they were headed was important, but so, too, was where they thought they were headed.

N O T E S

[1]Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., The Visible Hand (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1977), pp. 79, 89, 207, 240-244; on the pre-Civil War phase of this "transportation revolution," the classic study remains George Rogers Taylor, The Transportation Revolution (New York, 1951).

[2]Chandler writes that the great telegraph (and telephone) corporations, while "as large in terms of assets and employees as a large railroad system," were less complex to manage than the latter because of the uniform nature of their message traffic. He also observes that the Western Union was not the only firm to service a national market; the huge mail-order houses and, by the late 1880s, some industrial firms, also traded continent-wide. I certainly defer to Professor Chandler in his knowledge of the railroads (although elsewhere, curiously enough, he writes that the flow of telegraph and telephone messages "to all parts of the country called for even tighter internal control than did the movement of railroad transportation traffic"), but I would argue that the sheer number of corporate units (i.e., offices) that dotted the map made the Western Union a national firm in a way that no other could be. See Chandler, Visible Hand, pp. 89, 189, 288-289.

[3]Elisha P. Douglass, The Coming of Age of American Business (Chapel Hill, 1971), pp. 480-483.

[4]Robert Luther Thompson, Wiring a Continent (Princeton, 1947), Ch. XX, p. 334; Douglass, Coming of Age, pp. 484-485; Thomas C. Cochran and William Miller, The Age of Enterprise (New York, 1942, 1961), pp. 115-116.

[5]Douglass, Coming of Age, p. 484; Alvin F. Harlow, Old Wires and New Waves (New York, 1936), pp. 331-332.

[6]James D. Reid, The Telegraph in America (New York, 1879), pp. 813-815.

[7]BH, July 26, 1883; Senate, Education and Labor Committee, Report Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital (Washington, D.C., 1885), Vol. I, pp. 868, 1070. Norvin Green told the same committee that about 9,000 of the company's 12,600 offices were in fact railroad stations. The

operators there were usually railroad employees, although subject to Western Union approval. Green also estimated that "more than three-fourths" of America's railroads had such joint agreements with the Western Union. Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 881, 901, 921.

On the railroad franchises, see also NYTr, July 20, 1883, and Thompson, Wiring, pp. 443-444.

[8]BH, July 26, 1883; Thompson, Wiring, p. 444; Daniel J. Czitrom, Media and the American Mind (Chapel Hill, 1982), pp. 23-27.

The Boston Herald piece also mentioned the Western Union's low bonded indebtedness as a feature of its financial vigor.

[9]U.S. Department of Commerce, Historical Statistics of the United States (Washington, D.C., 1975), Part 1, p. 201, Part 2, p. 788.

The adjusted figures are in constant 1910-14 dollars. Another source gives somewhat different, if even more impressive profit figures for the firm, but I have decided to err on the side of caution and use the lower figures, which are still striking. See Department of Commerce and Labor, Statistical Abstract of the United States (Washington, D.C., 1911), p. 257.

[10]Ibid., Statistical Abstract, p. 257.

[11]Historical Statistics, Part 2, pp. 787-788.

Profit rate is expressed as per cent return (in net income) on total book capitalization, excluding the years 1870-72, for which the book value was missing. I have reckoned the dividend rates, extracted from ibid., as a percentage of the year's total book capitalization.

The editor of the operators' journal the Telegrapher claimed in 1873 that the company had suspended dividend payments from 1868 through 1874. While the dividends as a per cent of net income did sharply drop in the early 70s (and then even more sharply rise from 1874-5), they were apparently never halted. See the Telegrapher, July 31, 1875.

[12]Telegrapher, Jan. 7, 1871; Douglass, Coming of Age, pp. 485-486; Matthew Josephson, The Robber Barons (New York, 1934), pp. 205-207; Julius Grodinsky, Jay Gould (Philadelphia, 1957), p. 462.

I say "strictly telegraphic" because the Western Union, in 1909, itself fell victim to an even bigger fish, American Telephone & Telegraph. Czitrom, Media, p. 23.

[13]Douglass, Coming of Age, pp. 480, 484-487; Josephson, Robber Barons, pp. 206-207; Grodinsky, Gould, pp. 282, 462; BG, July 19, 1883; NYTr, July 28, 1883.

In a combination investors' prospectus and apologia for the Western Union, E.B. Grant as much as admitted that the company did water its stock. "There is great but unreasonable opposition to what is termed 'watering' stock," Grant wrote. "Watering to any conceivable extent does not affect the real value of a stock." Grant, The Western Union Telegraph Company: Its Past, Present and Future (New York, 1883), p. 30.

It is not clear exactly what the dividend rate was. Grodinsky claims that 7% was retained in the face of water and competition in the 80s, but the statistical material I have examined suggests that it never exceeded 6%. See Historical Statistics, Part 2, pp. 787-788.

[14]Douglass, Coming of Age, pp. 486-487, notes that the combination of competition and watered stock created a tension for the Western Union in that the former demanded rate cuts and the latter rate hikes, and thus Western Union rates, he goes on to say, were "never established on a uniform, rational basis." What he does not explore is whether the difference could have been made up in salary cuts or speed-ups.

Douglass also asserts (p. 486), but offers no proof, that telegraph concentration "was indispensable for the improvement of wages." It seems a dubious argument; what did improve wages, indirectly, was the long-term deflationary trend of the late 19th century.

[15]On the wage cuts and economizing in the 1870s and 80s, see NYH, Jan. 6, 1870; Telegrapher, Sept. 3, 1870, July 24, 1875; the Operator, May 15 and Dec. 15, 1875, June 1, 1883; BG, July 19, 1883; Senate, Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 893.

There were a few cases where cuts were restored. See Operator, Jan. 1 and Oct. 15, 1881, May 16, 1885.

[16]Operator, Jan. 15 and Sept. 1, 1881; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 228-229; Senate, 48th Congress, 1st Session (1884), Senate Report 577, p. 194; Thompson, Wiring, p. 422; Harlow, Old Wires, p. 413; EA, Sept. 1 and Dec. 16, 1887, Jan. 16 and Mar. 1, 1888; Telegrapher, Jan. 9, 1875.

[17]Journal of the Telegraph, Mar. 16, 1881 (hereafter cited as JT).

On the advantages of telegraph rationalization and consolidation, see Douglass, Coming of Age, p. 486.

Testifying before the Senate Committee on Education

and Labor, in 1883, reformer Henry George claimed that the Western Union reinforced its supremacy by suppressing or buying out technical innovations. Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 483.

[18]Grant, The Western Union, pp. 33, 49; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 901, 907-908, 964-965, Vol. II, p. 56; see also Reid, The Telegraph in America (1886 edition), p. 742, for a similar proportion of railroad offices in the late 1880s.

A table submitted by the Western Union to the Senate Education and Labor Committee hearings in 1883 gives a much smaller number of main and branch offices (1,286) run solely by the company, although the table excludes operators earning salaries under $30 a month, which may account for the difference. In any case, E.B. Grant's figure of 2,516 non-railroad offices (out of 12,386 offices of all kinds) seems most reasonable.

In general, about 2/3 of Western Union employees were probably managers and operators throughout the Gilded Age. The only consistent and reliable figures come from company records of the period 1867-1879, during which the percentage of all Western Union employees listed as managers and operators varied from 69.8% to 60% and averaged 63.7% over those 13 years. See Statistics of the Western Union Telegraph Company for the Years Ended 30th June 1867-1875 (bound corporate records), in Manuscript Division, New York Public Library.

[19]BH, July 26, 1883; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 953-954; Grant, Western Union, p. 54.

Other board members included: John van Horne (Vice-president), Edwin D. Morgan (ex-governor of New York, "capitalist and merchant"), Augustus Schell (director, New York Central R.R.), George B. Roberts (president, Pennsylvania R.R.), Hugh J. Jewett (president, Erie Rwy.), Samuel Sloan (president, Delaware & Lackawanna R.R.), Alonzo B. Cornell (ex-governor of New York), Edwards S. Sanford (vice-president, Adams Express), James H. Banker ("capitalist"), Robert Lennox Kennedy (vice-president, Bank of Commerce), F.L. Ames ("capitalist"), Harrison Durkee ("capitalist"), Edwin D. Worcester (treasurer, New York Central R.R.), W.D. Bishop (ex-president, New York, New Haven & Hartford R.R.), Zalmon G. Simmons ("capitalist, Kenosha, Wisconsin"), J.W. Glendinning (president, Acadia Coal Co.), Erastus Wiman (president, Great Northwestern Telegraph Co. of Canada), John T. Terry, C.C. Baldwin, John Pender, M.P., Percy R. Pyne.

[20]On Eckert's career, see David Homer Bates,

Lincoln in the Telegraph Office (New York, 1907), pp. 124-125, 137, 403-404, 408; the Electrical World, Mar. 18, 1893; Operator, Jan. 15, 1875; BH, July 15 and Aug. 9, 1883; Harlow, Old Wires, p. 325; Josephson, Robber Barons, pp. 203-204.

Although important as a technical-managerial pioneer in the industry, Eckert had a reputation for technological conservatism (and stubbornness) as far back as the early 1870s. The Telegrapher referred to him as "this charlatan" and noted that "such men as General Superintendent ECKERT . . . never allow business interests to interfere with personal prejudices." See Telegrapher, Feb. 4, 1871, and Frank Lewis Dyer and Thomas Commerford Martin, Edison. His Life and Inventions (New York, 1929), Vol. I, p. 165.

Despite Gould's importance, his dubious talents did not include those of a manager. Writes his hagiographer, Julius Grodinsky: "Strictly speaking, he was not a good corporate manager," and "he declined to become president of the Union Pacific, and he would not undertake the nominal management of his three major telegraph properties: the Atlantic & Pacific, the American Union, and the Western Union." Gould, pp. 22-23.

Corporate lawyers, too, were a significant part of the company's operations. See, e.g., EA, June 16, 1886.

[21]Operator, Sept. 15, 1879; Bates, Lincoln, pp. 27, 30, 360, 408; EA, Nov. 1, 1886.

Other than Eckert, the younger Cornell seems to have been the only Western Union board member with a background as a practical operator. His father evidently had him initiated into the craft and made manager of the Cleveland office of his line in 1848.

Clowry succeeded Eckert as president of the company, in 1900, presumably the last former operator to do so. Chandler later headed the Postal Telegraph Co. Dyer and Martin, Edison, Vol. I, p. 60.

[22]Harold P. Livesay, Andrew Carnegie and the Rise of Big Business (Boston, 1975), p. 33.

Livesay is specifically dealing with the railroads, but his argument is equally applicable to the telegraph for obvious reasons.

[23]NYT, July 20, 1883; NYTr, July 20, 1883; Telegrapher, Sept. 3, 1870; CPD, July 30, 1883; JT, May 15, 1869; EA, Mar. 1, 1887; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 286.

The Division breakdown in 1883 was East (east of Pittsburgh and Buffalo inclusive), Central, or Western (west of Pittsburgh and Buffalo, north of the Ohio and Potomac Rivers), and Southern (all country south of the

Ohio and Potomac Rivers and east of the Mississippi.) There had earlier been a separate Pacific Division; see JT, Feb. 15, 1868.

Within a Division the administration was further organized into Districts, headed by District Superintendents.

[24]Chandler, in The Visible Hand, pp. 95, 205, argues that the military influence on the shape of the new corporate bureaucracies was minimal. He is right to note the original and indigenous nature of some of the corporate forms, but I am still impressed by Livesay's thesis and the appearance of terminology reminiscent of the military that he mentions (division, semaphore, court-martial) and indeed the ones that I have found in connection with the Western Union. Curiously enough, Chandler himself, in discussing the Western Union, notes on p. 198 that the telegraph giant "relied on the same line and staff distinctions as those used for the railroads." The terms "line" and "staff" are of unmistakably military provenance.

A precis of the Western Union's corporate growth and structure since the 1860s is given by Chandler on pp. 197-200.

[25]Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 963.

[26]For descriptions and illustrations of large telegraph office operating rooms, see Senate Report 577 (1884), pp. 258-259; JT, May 15, 1869 and Feb. 15, 1875; Charles L. Buckingham, "The Telegraph of To-Day," Scribner's, July 1889; Scientific American, Mar. 26, 1892; EA, Oct. 1, 1886 and July 1, 1887; R.R. Bowker, ed., "Great American Industries, XII-Electricity," Harper's, Oct. 1896, p. 734; Electrical World, Jan. 30, 1892.

On hours, see Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 119, 154-156, 168; Operator, Dec. 1, 1884; Reid, Telegraph in America, p. 572.

[27]Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 155; Operator, Feb. 15, 1875, Jan. 1, 1876 and May 15, 1884; Telegrapher, July 31, 1875, see also Sept. 4, 1875; TA, July 1, 1883; CPD, July 30, 1883, for complaints of rushed meals, poor quality, and high prices. Meal tickets, deducted from paychecks, were used in the restaurants. An average meal, at New York in 1884, was 17 3/4¢. There was also provision--at separate tables--for those who wished to bring their own lunches in. The Western Union's closest rival, the B & O, also provided a company-run lunchroom in its New York headquarters. See EA, Apr. 16, 1887.

[28]TA, June 16, 1883; Telegrapher, May 7, 1870; EA, June 16, 1886; Operator, Nov. 15, 1883; JT, Nov. 15, 1876.

[29]Ella Cheever Thayer, Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes (New York, 1879), pp. 18-19; Operator, Mar. 1, 1881.

[30]NYTr, July 22, 1883; Senate, 43rd Congress, 1st Session, (1874), Senate Report 242, p. 48; EA, June 1 and Sept. 1, 1886.

[31]Telegrapher, Oct. 31, 1875; TA, June 1, 1883.
The Brooklyn report mentioned a $60-$25 range (not all the branches were Western Union, and the American Rapid was stimulating competition). "It is almost impossible," the anonymous operator wrote, "for a married man to live by the sweat of his brow in this place."
"There is no operator getting under $30 [a month] ," Norvin Green claimed in his testimony before the Senate Committee on Education and Labor, "who does not get pay for something else or in some other form. For instance, we have a few girls at some branch offices in small hotels who get $15 a month salary, the hotel agreeing to give them their board and lodging in addition, making probably, quite as good a salary as $30 a month where they have to pay their own board." Green also asserted that "some" such offices took in no more than $20-$30 a month in receipts. (Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 886.)
For branch operators attached to the Harrisburg, Pa., Western Union office, the usual payment seems to have been commissions (ranging from over $20 to 6¢) in the 1870s through 1890s, or a standard salary of $15 in the 80s and $20 in the 90s. See Record Book, Harrisburg Western Union Office, in Western Union Collection, Box 65, Division of Electricity and Modern Physics, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter cited as Harrisburg Book).

[32]Frank Parsons, "The Telegraph Monopoly," Part V, Arena, May 1896, p. 953; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 119, 156, 881, 901, 921, 933-934; Operator, Sept. 15, 1874; EA, July 1, 1886; Atlanta Constitution, July 22, 1883; NYTr, July 20, 1883.
As noted, the railroad offices were an important and mutually advantageous arrangement between Western Union and many railroads. Western Union spokesmen like Norvin Green claimed that the company could not otherwise economically justify the tiny outlets, and that the marginal commercial volume at such offices made their maintenance dependent upon the franchise trade-off. Jay Gould went so far as to assert that the Western Union had kept some of the offices in service despite their losing money as a courtesy to the public. The rail operators, usually salaried railroad employees, sometimes got a 10% commission

on the Western Union receipts; when the commercial traffic grew to the extent that it interfered with railroad business--that is, took more than half of the operator's time--Green testified that his company would then open a regular commercial office at the place.

[33]JT, May 15, 1869; Senate Report 242 (1874), p. 15; Operator, May 15, 1875; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 132, 765-766, 769; NYTr, July 17, 1883.
The linemen were subdivided into climbers and apprentice "ground-hands."

[34]Operator, May 15, 1875 and Dec. 1, 1884; CPD, July 30, 1883; Harrisburg Book, Oct. 1883; NOP, July 19, 1883.

[35]NYT, July 30, 1883; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 172; Dyer and Martin, Edison, Vol. I, p. 51.
Part of the skill of the press operator involved the ability to make clear "manifold" copies, evidently a contemporary form of carbon copy.
The press category probably also included the mercantile and exchange operators who handled stock and market quotations.

[36]For complaints of capricious grading of operators and favoritism, see Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 112, 126, 231; NYTr, July 17, 1883; TA, July 16, 1883; EA, Apr. 16, 1887; NYT, July 17, 1883.

[37]CPD, Aug. 4, 1883; BG, July 24, 1883; EA, Sept. 16, 1887; Senate Report 577 (1884), p. 259.
Another report of the first-class operator's repertoire was the ability to adjust one's instrument while working to compensate for wire irregularities and the weather.

[38]Operator, May 15, 1875; CPD, July 30, 1883; on the rural operators generally, see also Parsons, "Telegraph Monopoly," Pt. V, p. 953; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 156; EA, July 1, 1886; Operator, Sept. 15, 1874.

[39]Labor and Capital, Vol. II, pp. 1272-1273; see also Telegrapher, Jan. 2, 1875; Charles Barnard, "The Telegrapher of To-Day," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, Oct. 1881, pp. 714-716; JT, Nov. 1, 1869. See also TA, June 1, 1883; NYTr, July 17 and 23, 1883; R. Riordan, "Recent Advances in Telegraphy," Popular Science Monthly, May 1876, pp. 72-73.

[40]Elizabeth Faulkner Baker, Technology and Women's Work (New York, 1964), pp. 244-245; Monthly Labor Review, Mar. 1932, pp. 501ff.; JT, Jan. 1, 1870; EA, June 1, 1886 and Feb. 1, 1887; BH, July 19, 1883; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 159-160; Boston Evening Transcript, July 20, 1883; BG, July 21, 1883; TA, July 1, 1883; Walter P. Phillips, Sketches Old and New (New York, 1897), pp. ix, 208.

The Jan. 24, 1886 edition of the labor journal John Swinton's Paper, in an article on mechanization and deskilling in industry, carried a brief review of developments in telegraphy, based on information supplied Swinton by John Taltavall. It said that Wheatstone automatics, run by a score of $10-$30-a-month "girls," replaced 75 skilled operators, and could send messages at the rate of 200 to 300 words a minute.

[41]JT, Mar. 1, 1870; BH, July 26, 1883; Barnard, "Telegrapher of To-Day," pp. 708-711.

[42]Barnard, "Telegraph of To-Day," p. 711; Dyer and Martin, Edison, Vol. I, p. 155.

[43]Statistical Abstract of the United States, p. 257; Historical Statistics of the United States, Part 1, pp. 200-201.

John Campbell claimed in 1883 that the Western Union used more and cheaper (and less skillful) operators than its competitors: "The opposition companies, as a general thing, endeavor to engage the best operators; in fact, they are compelled to do so in order to compete with the Western Union, which has better facilities including exclusive use of the quadruplex for handling business than the other companies have." Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 112-113.

There are indications of a speed-up in 1880 (under the impetus of the Gould assault). At New York Western Union headquarters, Manager A.S. Downer began requiring operators to record the number of messages handled per day. "Each operator," the Magnet reported, "keeps his own account and works hard to increase his 'average' and, if possible, exceed the work of the many competitors for first place on the list." The Magnet, Feb. 14, 1880; see also Operator, Feb. 15, 1880 and Nov. 18, 1882.

Toward the late 80s, operators began to increase their volume by adopting the typewriter to take copy, replacing the traditional steel pen and inkwell ensemble. See, e.g., EA, Dec. 1, 1886.

[44]BG, July 19, 1883.

The scale of volume that dictated the use of varying kinds of wires and instruments followed this pattern,

according to the Telegraphers' Advocate:

600 or less messages daily: single instrument and wire
600-1200 " " : duplex
1500 or more " " : quadruplex

The gap between 1200 and 1500 was not explained. See TA, Aug. 1, 1883.

[45]On telegraphy and the high-volume aspects of the corporate capitalist revolution, see Chandler, Visible Hand, p. 200.

The New York to Philadelphia message speed is from John McClelland's testimony in Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 131.

On traffic and Sunday patterns, see also EA, Oct. 16, 1886; CPD, July 18, 1883; BG, July 23, 1883.

Besides the problems of the "quad," the lesser capacity of small and rural offices (and their telegraphers) was also a traffic bottleneck and hindrance to economies of speed. See Senate Report 577 (1884), p. 261.

[46]Bowker, "Great American Industries," p. 734; JT, May 15, 1869; EA, Mar. 1 and July 1, 1887; Senate Report 577, pp. 258-259; Electrical World, Jan. 30, 1892; Reid, Telegraph in America, p. 572; Operator, Feb. 15, 1875.

For a later example of like-minded lunchroom welfare capitalism (though not in a telegraph office), see Margery W. Davies, Woman's Place is at the Typewriter (Philadelphia, 1982), p. 124.

[47]Operator, May 15, 1876.

C H A P T E R I I I

The Knights of the Key

The American telegraph operator of the late 19th century seems a contradictory and perplexing fellow.[1] He set much store by his membership in a "genteel," middle-class "profession," at the same time earning a reputation for being irresponsible and dissolute. He complained how difficult it was to maintain a family in respectable circumstances, yet he appeared to be a footloose, single young man more concerned with beating boarding-house bills than sinking roots and raising children. He bemoaned, long and loud, the degradation of his craft and income, but his income may in fact have been increasing, and his Morse skills never suffered the kind of catastrophic assault that unmade such craftsmen as molders, weavers, and shoemakers until well after the turn of the century. What is one to make of all this, then--the Gilded Age telegrapher as schizophrenic, or worse, liar?

Probably he was neither. If this portrait of the operator appears ambiguous and confused, it is because the operators themselves--in a social sense--were confused. They were among the very first mass white-collar employees, poised between an older order of entrepreneurial capitalism

and an ascendent corporate one, between a declining "old" middle class and an emerging "new" one. It was among the nether strata of the latter that most telegraphers found themselves. They were part of a lower-middle class in the making.

Despite its limitations, the federal census remains a useful place to begin asking who the telegraphers were.

Most operators were men and most were relatively young. Not until 1890 did the census break operators' age groups down into detailed segments, and although distorted because the category lumped telegraph and telephone operators, the 1890 figures are probably still fairly representative for the Gilded Age. With women included for comparison, they divide as follows:[2]

AGE GROUP	MALE	FEMALE
10-14	248 (.5%)	71 (.8%)
15-24	22,858 (52%)	5,811 (68%)
25-34	14,487 (33%)	1,901 (22%)
35-44	4,336 (10%)	477 (5%)
45-54	1,210 (2%)	127 (1%)
55-64	272 (.6%)	34 (.4%)
65+	67 (.1%)	11 (.1%)
?	262 (.5%)	42 (.4%)

Typically in his late teens or early 20s, the postbellum operator was also likely to be a native-born white and,

at least by 1890 (though probably well before) so usually were his parents. Of that minority of operators born abroad, most were of Western European or Canadian origin.[3] As to marital status, the 1890 figures must again serve as a weathervane for our period, and they show that a solid majority of the men in 1890--65%--were single. Except for a piddling 1% who were either divorced or widowers, the remaining 34% of the telegraphers claimed a spouse.[4]

Like his fellow Americans, the late 19th-century operator drifted or swam in the period's great streams of migration and immigration. "As a rule," the New York Dispatch informed its readers in 1874, "telegraph operators are either village bred, or have graduated from the ranks of messenger boys, who are employed in every large city, in numbers ranging from ten to a hundred."[5] Awed by the weight and color of the European exodus to the United States in these years, it is easy to forget that an equally important flow of population simultaneously took place within the nation's borders. Most Americans were "village bred," and most telegraph offices, as adjuncts of railroad lines, were also in rural settings. In all probability, most operators were country folk. Norman H.

Rugg was. Born in Saratoga, New York, in 1845, Rugg began to learn the craft under his brother's tutelage in 1860 and in three years was managing the local Western Union office, a career cut short by his death in 1871. Mortimer D. Shaw, Master Workman of the St. Louis Brotherhood during the Great Strike, had been an Illinois farm boy in the 1850s and 60s until the wires lured him away. When the craft journal Electric Age complained in 1886 of telegraph "colleges" that defrauded would-be operators, it described "a young man, working a thrashing [sic] machine or maneouvering a plow" as a common victim of such schools.[6]

Whether they stayed at small-town posts, as Rugg did,[7] or moved on to bigger and better offices, as Shaw did, the many operators of rural origin were no doubt largely of Anglo-Saxon Protestant descent, the sons of farmers, village mechanics, small tradesmen, or professionals. Those who entered telegraphy in the bigger towns and cities, on the other hand, often came from decidedly different backgrounds. In particular, the sons and grandsons of Irish immigrants appear to have found a place in the new industry.[8]

There is an impressionistic sense that many telegraphers, especially urban ones, were Irish-American. Reading through the operators' journals of the time, one is struck by the frequency of Irish names. Such evidence

demands extreme caution, since names that sound Irish may be English or Scottish, and vice versa, the whole matter made hopelessly confusing by the existence of the Scotch-Irish. But less dubious signs also point to a marked Irish presence at the keys. "Some of the operators who went out of the offices with members of the brotherhood," reported the New York Times during the Great Strike, "were Catholics, and according to the rules of their church they were prohibited from joining a secret organization." The same problem occurred four years later, when a revived Brotherhood re-affiliated with the Knights of Labor. "Many members of the profession will not affiliate with the brotherhood," the Electric Age regretfully noted, "because they imagine the objects antagonize those of the Catholic Church." The Catholicism of "many" telegraphers is indirect evidence of Irish origins, but more explicit testimony has survived. Among the fictional sketches that Walter P. Phillips wrote to immortalize the members of his craft, he chose to typify the urban messenger boy who works his way up the telegraphic ladder by a character named Patsy Flanagan.[9] Patsy was more than a figment of Phillips' literary imagination. "The Messenger Boys," one of their number in New York told a labor journal in 1887, "are mostly the sons of hard laboring men, residing for the most part in the 'tough' Eastern and Western quarters of this city.

They are almost wholly descendents of Irish parents." Like politics, municipal services, and various skilled trades, telegraphy provided the offspring of Irish peasants a calling and an avenue of mobility. Whether his parents were among the millions driven from already marginal plots by the horrors of the Great Famine is uncertain, but Thomas Brennan had much to thank telegraphy for. Born Christmas Day, 1844, in Ireland, Brennan began as a messenger in New York City at the age of 17, went on to become an operator, then a chief, and, at 42, was Assistant Manager of the huge operating force at 195 Broadway. At a lively stag dinner and musicale that followed a baseball game between New York area operators in 1875, two of their number--Landy and McDermott by name--entertained the gathering by singing "an Irish localism" called "Since Terence Joined the Gang." "They created much merriment," the Telegrapher reported, "by their imitations of the Hibernian element of Gotham." Self-congratulation, as much as self-parody, was at work that evening.[10]

There was surely truth in the claim that telegraphy provided a rewarding career for industrious and intelligent men. The young operator of the 1880s, looking around

him, could find evidence that former Knights of the Key had either advanced within the field or on to high positions in other callings. "As I have said," Western Union President Norvin Green reminded the Senate Committee on Education and Labor, "all our general superintendents and office managers, all the vice-presidents on duty and all the general managers and assistants, have come up from the key." Thomas Eckert had, of course, and so had many others running the giant firm or its competitors in the 1880s. William B. Somerville, Press Manager and corporate spokesman during the walkout, had started as a junior operator at Buffalo in the late 1850s. George E. Holbrook, born in 1857 in tiny Deposit, New York, where he had the benefit of "a fair education in a primitive district school," had ascended to the post of Night Traffic Chief at Western Union headquarters by 1888. His exact contemporary, Brooklyn native Christopher P. Flood, who in 1887 managed the Postal Telegraph Company's New York office, began his climb in 1868 by carrying messages for the Bankers' & Brokers' Telegraph. In 1865, 22-year-old William Joseph Dealy had sent the announcement, while the rubble was still warm, of the fall of the Confederate capital at Richmond; eighteen years later, he was master of the 444 operators of 195 Broadway.[11]

Telegraphy worked its magic of success upon those who exchanged it for a different occupation, too. As early

as 1868, the Western Union's Journal of the Telegraph offered readers models of achievement by former Knights of the Key under the heading "How Operators Rise." Marshall Jewell had risen. The currier's son turned telegrapher won the governorship of Connecticut that year--not, to be sure, without an intervening and prosperous career in business--and would, by 1874, serve as President Grant's Postmaster General.[12] Much better known were the colorful careers of Thomas Edison and Andrew Carnegie, both of whom had also begun to make their way in life sending and receiving Morse, but others, if less famous, had also used the key as a springboard to higher ground. Theodore N. Vail, who divided his attention between clerking in a New Jersey drug store and mastering telegraphy in the 1860s, later became the managerial architect of the American Telephone & Telegraph Company. Others of prominence, as corporate managers, journalists, and statesmen, could likewise trace their impressive mobility back to a berth on the wires.[13]

The remarkable success of such men was due to skill and hard work, no doubt, but for most of them, to chance as well: they had the good luck to have been born at the right time. As young men in the 1840s-1860s, many who guided the operations of the Western Union had entered telegraphy when it was new and wide open. Although brawling and unstable, it was also rife with opportunity,

with its proliferation of small firms whose competing poles and wires marched over the countryside. With the coming of the Civil War, the industry beckoned to prospective operators more insistently still.[14] Thus blessed, the early generations of telegraphers often assumed posts of responsibility as they, together with the industry, matured. An "Old Timers' Association" of those who had entered the craft from the 1840s through the Civil War comprised just such men. For 82 of them, we know the dates of their first telegraphic employment (as messengers or operators) and their occupations as of 1880. Their careers are illuminating. Forty-two of the men (51%) were currently managers or superintendents of telegraph lines, 7 (9%) were chief operators, 17 (20%) still rattled a key as operators or railroad agent-operators, and 16 (20%) were in various pursuits outside of telegraphy. The proportion of mobility to management positions is striking indeed, but it becomes more so if chiefs are counted as junior managers; then it rises to 60%. And if four of the men in outside fields who nonetheless claimed managerial status are also included, the proportion of those who exchanged glass partitions for roll-top desks expands to 64%. These were the children of telegraphy's Golden Age.[15]

By contrast, the 1880s seemed to be the Dark Age of the craft. What had once looked like a boundless

horizon now appeared to be a dead end, as opportunities shrank within the industry for ambitious young men. Nor had the decline begun suddenly in the 80s. The flush days of the 1860s were barely past when the Telegrapher, in 1871, observed the glow surrounding the occupation beginning to fade. "The best and most valuable telegraphers," its editor declared, "are continually leaving the profession and engaging in other lines of business because telegraphing no longer offers sufficient inducement to retain them in the service." Even the Western Union's house organ could offer little substantial encouragement. Promotion, it admitted, was a sign of success, "but it can not be so to all, for the positions open for preferment are but few, compared with the number of those who consider themselves qualified to fill them." By 1875, the same journal was consoling stultified Western Union operators with the thought that "faithful performance of duty," although unlikely to raise income or status, was nonetheless a sure sign of "character" and thus a source of inspiration to others.[16]

Despite the general economic recovery of the 1880s, jeremiads that the mass of operators was doomed to occupational stagnation grew louder. The Operator, in 1884, noted that "one of the cardinal principles of all parental operators [was] that their offspring shall not follow in their footsteps," while the year before, no less a spokesman

for the industry than Norvin Green had flatly told a Senate committee that "a large majority of operators quit the key when they get married and look for something that is better"--a pale recommendation for the enterprise he headed.[17] A few half-hearted attempts to discern some kind of improvement appeared in the late 80s. The Electric Age spoke of a "decided advance financially" and "promotions of various kinds" in 1886, but one searches in vain for an assenting chorus.[18] More common was the familiar indictment of low incomes and crippled mobility, repeated into the 1890s, and not only by operators. Postmaster General John Wanamaker took official note of the demoralizing and stagnant condition of the craft in 1890. Five years later, economist Richard T. Ely, comparing the situation of American operators under private ownership with that of those employed in the state-run German service, found the contrast "painful" and "really a disgrace to our own country." Walter Phillips, who himself had risen from a key to become a general manager of the United Press, threw up his hands in frustration and frankly advised young operators to get out of telegraphy while the getting was good. "It is quite as unreasonable for men to continue to do telegraphic work if their hands and brains are fitted for a higher order of employment," he wrote in 1888, "as it would be for a college graduate to remain as janitor or librarian in the university where he had been

prepared, instead of going forth to battle with the dragons which environ the path leading to success."[19]

Quite a few operators did strike out on other paths. "It has been said," Postmaster General Wanamaker reported to Congress in 1890, "that one-third of all the telegraph operators are continually preparing themselves for other professions, and that the other two-thirds are continually thinking of doing so."[20] The proportions may not have been exact, but the sentiments probably were. Medicine held considerable attraction for disgruntled operators. "Billy" Washburne, a railroad operator in Chicago, was on the verge of receiving an M.D. in 1875. At the time of the Great Strike, Knights and Brotherhood activist John McClelland already had his. At Philadelphia, Harry W. Orr, another prominent strike leader, alternated practicing dentistry days and sending Associated Press report at night. In 1885, the Operator recorded five doctors and one dentist leading double lives as telegraphers at Western Union headquarters.[21] The law beckoned as well. "Fatty" Gooding forsook a Chicago key in 1875 and headed west to put his legal talents at the disposal of the citizens of Evanston, Wyoming. Others turned to journalism, stenography, technical pursuits, and even the cloth. And David Adams, reversing the usual pattern, packed his trunk and left 195 Broadway in 1885 to try his luck with a 10-acre truck and poultry farm in Ontario.[22]

Operators deserting the industry or plying sterile careers within it were signs that telegraphy, like the economy that had spawned it, was changing. Companies that began small grew large to survive--so large, as in the case of the Western Union, as to be of revolutionary dimensions. In turn, the individual telegrapher's stature, on the shop floor and in the enterprise, changed too. Both managers and operators recognized this well before the crisis of 1883. As early as 1870, the Telegrapher's editor, while guilty of romanticizing telegraphy's swaddling period, still spoke some truth when he reflected that

> In the earlier days of the telegraph in this country the employes felt a personal interest in the success of the lines upon which they were employed. They were recognized as being more than mere hirelings; and, although more labor was required than now, it was rendered cheerfully; and, in return, privileges were accorded to them in the way of vacations and similar favors, which are now unknown.

But all this was past. "With the expansion of the Western Union Telegraph Company to mammoth proportions," the Telegrapher explained a year later, "this custom [of company-paid vacation substitutes] was abolished, and employes desiring vacations required to provide, at their own expense, for the discharge of their duties during their absence."[23] Nor would the company foot the bill for an operator's time lost for illness. "No sick list here," a New York operator sarcastically reported in 1874, "since the

introduction of the 'Universal Panacea,' called Lefferts' Extract of 'dock.'"[24]

Docking pay and denying vacations, painful though they were, were symptoms rather than causes of the operators' malaise. The fundamental problem had to do with corporate growth and rationalization, with the immense scale of the Western Union whose inverse was the diminishing power and status of the Gilded Age telegrapher. This was most evident in the factory-like setting of 195 Broadway, of course. It was less so in a smaller office, especially where operators worked alone. Yet even there, the overwhelming presence of the communications giant--through salaries and commissions, supervisory hierarchies, regulations, and the great wire network itself--was always there. And while relations between "officers and men" had never radiated the warmth that Golden Age myth ascribed to them, they were decidedly chilling in the 1870s and 80s. "But is not the feeling '<u>we</u>, the operators, and <u>they</u>, the company,' almost universal?" asked a troubled lady operator in 1873. Nine years later, <u>Operator</u> editor W.J. Johnston sighed that "a feeling of cordiality . . . between all the component members of the telegraphic system, from the highest down," was dead.[25] It seemed to be so at the big Chicago office. "Hearty friendships are rarely formed between the managers and operators," a Windy City telegrapher reported in 1881. "There is a high

fence of separation to anything like such familiar intercourse, and each side finds a certain kind of pleasurable interest in keeping the fence in constant repair."[26] Company officers and managers had industriously dug postholes for that fence since at least the early 1870s. In the wake of the unsuccessful strike that began the decade, the Western Union's James D. Reid, speaking for the corporation through the Journal of the Telegraph, made plain the shape of things to come: "the telegraph service demands a rigorous discipline to which its earlier administration was unused. The character of the business has wholly changed. It cannot now subserve public interests or its own healthful development without the precision and uniformity of mechanism."[27]

Machines, indeed, were what some operators complained of being reduced to. Two days before the Great Strike, a Boston man damned the company for having made him and his fellows "feel that we are mere machines, to be turned this way and that, and worked until we are worn out, and then to be thrown aside, as other machines are when they are useless," and other operators that July also found the metaphor apt to describe their plight--"as dogs and machines," "as machines or slaves," and "as machines and not as men" all spoke to the same sense of abuse.[28]

Feeling degraded to the level of a machine, the operator's horizon was narrowing, his prestige sinking.

There were complaints about the deteriorating quality of operators, too. Yet not everyone agreed that the Western Union was solely to blame. Some telegraphers took their colleagues to task for their lack of industry and ambition, and for indifference to technological knowledge. Pioneer operators had not only been diligent but well-rounded; now, telegraphers had become a stunted tribe, many no better than "mere manipulators of a key."[29] The way out of this rut was hard work and self-help, especially self-education in matters electrical. "The electricians, superintendents and managers of the future are among those who are now studying the lessons taught by the JOURNAL and kindred publications," the Western Union's company sheet lectured in 1876--one year after the rival Operator had begun "to drop the gossip and small talk of the profession and to indulge in more serious and practical discussion," as its editor later explained.[30] But stymied mobility rested on something more complex than sloth and ignorance. "There is a tendency," the Telegrapher noticed in 1875,

> which becomes more marked as the telegraph business is extended and developed, for telegraph operators to become divided into classes or divisions, which are becoming as distinctly defined as though established by authority. This was not the case in the earlier days of telegraphy, when an operator was expected to be proficient not only in the manipulation of the key and the reading of signals, but also in the running of circuits, making batteries, the management of offices, and the repair of lines when temporarily interrupted.

The perceptive editor never defined those "classes or divisions" forming among telegraphers (presumably those of press, first, and second-class operators) but his reading of the change within the industry seems convincing. Most operators would not be deskilled in the usual sense, but an informal division of labor among them was coalescing as the lines and corporate structure of the Western Union ramified. The operators' numbers grew, their duties narrowed, and their overall standing fell. Even the fastest press operator, in the final analysis, was becoming a "mere manipulator."[31]

This de facto sorting of operators suggested a Western Union drive to rationalize its work force, but there was still much that was irrational about its personnel policy. "The salaries of telegraph operators, which range from $50 to $110 per month," the Philadelphia Inquirer noted in 1877, "are unfortunately not paid by any recognized schedule or standard of ability, but according to the scarcity of help at the particular time when they were hired, or the favoritism of an official." Asked during the Senate Education and Labor Committee hearings in 1883 "how many classes of salaries" his company had for its operators, Norvin Green confessed, "We have not any such scale as that," and could only offer the senators a table of salaries, ranging from $30 to $150 a month graduated in $5 steps, with no indications of skill or

seniority.[32] The favoritism of some managers angered telegraphers as much as the capricious pay scales. Calling for the Western Union to reform its personnel policies by adopting "civil service principles," an 1887 Electric Age editorial blamed "cliques and factions" and "those who command the 'biggest pull'" for denying worthy telegraphers the promotions and raises due them. Critics charged that operators doing the same work did not necessarily receive the same pay. In some instances, the less competent of two men drew the higher salary. Such corporate behavior seemed not only vicious but stupid. Were not these personnel policies, Senator Wilkinson Call of Florida asked John McClelland in 1883, of dubious wisdom in the light of the Western Union's own economic self-interest? "Well," replied McClelland, "they do some very funny things in the Western Union office, some things that we cannot understand."[33]

Operators had no trouble understanding the salary cuts that the telegraph monopoly effected in the period. In terms of nominal salary levels, late 19th-century telegraphers were losing ground, and saw this as yet another sign--together with the rise of a huge, impersonal employer, narrowed skill ranges and status, and a career ladder whose rungs were rotting and falling away--of the degradation of their craft. Special pleading was always involved in complaints about salaries. Telegrapher

activists tended to cite the highest pay levels of the Golden Age and the lowest ones of the later decades.[34] But the cuts were real, and they came in essentially two forms. The first, the "Sliding Scale" reductions of 1876, occurred, Norvin Green later claimed, as a response to the depression of the 70s. Progressive cuts, reaching from the president down to those earning $600 or more a year, involved paycheck losses of from 5% for the latter to 25% for the former. A first-class operator at New York, for example, making $120 a month went down to $108; one getting $90 a month, to $85.50. For a second-class operator rated at $55 per month, the drop was to $52.25. "This is, we believe, the first general reduction that the Western Union has made," declared the crestfallen Operator when it learned of the impending cuts, "and, as the financial condition of the Company is just now so prosperous, it was quite unexpected."[35]

The second method used to diminish salaries was more diffuse. "It is a favorite tactic of some telegraph Superintendents," the Telegrapher charged in 1870, "whenever a change is made in an office, to fill the vacancy at a reduction from the compensation formerly paid." Thirteen years later, operators still complained of this system--compounded of local office managers pressured from above to institute "economies," and the "nomadic disposition" of many operators--that had been chipping away

at salary figures. An operator making $80 in New York, P.J. Tierney explained in 1883, might pick up and head for Chicago to take an $85 berth, assuming a post for which his predecessor, before dying, retiring, or moving on, had been getting $90. And on it went, depressing the general level of telegraphic compensation. Existing company records support the angry operators' claims. In 1866, at the Western Union's Harrisburg, Pennsylvania office, Manager W.D. Sargent took home $110 a month. When Horace A. Clute replaced him 5 years later, he settled for $100. Clute's successor in 1881, C.A. Bigler, had to make do with $90, and he, in turn, gave way in 1887 to Emil Teupser, who was to run the office through 1900 at the sum of $80 a month. Sometimes the cuts were especially steep. The same year that Teupser became manager, Amos Mumma, formerly a $45 operator, graduated to the post of chief operator, and was rewarded with a raise to $50 a month; but the previous chief, R.B. Zeigler, had been getting $80.[36]

Whether the Western Union employed this piecemeal scheme or the more dramatic Sliding Scale, many telegraphers felt mightily wronged. To the insult of blocked mobility and decaying prestige, the company added the injury of thinner pay envelopes. One indignant member of the craft seized on the current popularity of H.M.S. Pinafore to lash out at corporate economies in the pages of the

Operator by having "Sir Botelle Porter" sing:[37]

> Of 'lectric knowledge I acquired such a grip,
> That they gave me the efficient managership.
> The boys in the office soon set up a wail,
> For I cut 'em all down on the sliding scale.
> I whittled their pay with a hand so free,
> That now I am a super of the W.U.T.

Nor did the oppression end with pay cuts, for as the Western Union grew and consolidated, it reduced the number and quality of telegraphic job opportunities. Mergers and takeovers, with one possible exception, had consistently thrown operators out of work. Vice-President John Van Horne told a Senate panel in 1884 why, in economic terms, this was so: "In a town of two or three thousand inhabitants one operator can do all the business. If there are three companies there they are just wasting the money on two operators." But big-city operators lost out, too. After the Gould-arranged Western Union-American Union marriage in 1881, the Operator reported that while two main offices would still handle New York City business, "a great number of competing offices [would] be closed in all the large cities throughout the Union" to eliminate duplicate facilities. And duplicate facilities employed duplicate operators.[38]

The telegraphers' indictment of Western Union greed and "grinding," of its degradation of a once-fertile occupation into a barren one, was essentially true. But although uncommonly powerful, the company was neither

omnipotent nor omniscient. Much of the blame for the Gilded Age telegrapher's decline does lie with the Western Union, but the full story of that decline involved other influences that, while related to the contours of Western Union size and power, were not entirely dependent on them. This was especially true of the labor market in telegraphy.

During the industry's vigorous growth at mid-century, the supply of operators failed to keep up with demand, a trend that national events after the firing on Fort Sumter accelerated. "Immediately after the beginning of the war," John Campbell told legislators in 1883, "there was quite an increase in the compensation of telegraphers. The Government, of course, was compelled to have a large number of operators." But the war's end slackened demand considerably, and this, exacerbated by corporate concentration, an ongoing influx of recruits because of the continuing appeal to rural and urban youth that telegraphy still held, and the rigors of the business cycle, made it increasingly harder to find a place at the key.[39] By the early 1870s there were already signs that the profession's best days were over. Operators who followed Horace Greeley's famous advice could not always squeeze through a frontier safety valve. "It will do no harm to mention, for the telegraphers in the East," wrote a Nevada operator in 1870,

> that at present there is little or no chance for operators to secure positions on the Pacific coast. There are now many telegraphers here out of employment and "dead broke," who are daily passing eastward along the line of the railroad, and even "footing it," when not fortunate in getting "dead headed" by train, and dependent upon their more fortunate brethren for an occasional "square meal."

The ensuing depression choked off opportunity even more. In San Francisco, an anonymous operator spoke in 1875 of "that ever overflowing evil of going west," and six years later, the general economic upturn notwithstanding, a Union Pacific Railroad telegrapher warned Eastern Knights of the Key that "the entire Western country is flooded with idle operators, all having flocked West with a mistaken idea.. . . "[40] The glutted labor market was not simply a Western problem. John Campbell reckoned that the number of telegraphers had "probably doubled" between 1870 and 1883. Whether his estimate was accurate or not, he and virtually all others well-informed on the subject agreed that the craft was overpopulated.[41]

The peculiar nature of telegraphy made matters worse. In a job that placed a premium on stamina and working under high pressure, youth was a considerable asset, and, as noted, most operators were in fact young single males.[42] But unattached young men were also those most likely to pick up and leave a position, whether to seek higher pay, adventure, or simply a change of scene. The close intertwining of telegraph and railway systems

increased the ease and appeal of moving on. The "boys" in the 1860s, Thomas Edison remembered, "had extraordinary facilities for travel. As a usual thing it was only necessary for them to board a train and tell the conductor they were operators. Then they would go as far as they liked. The number of operators was small, and they were in demand everywhere." But while that demand shrank, the peripatetic impulses of young telegraphers did not. Whether such roving inspired the piecemeal wage cutting system described earlier or was a response to it is unclear, but once begun, the wandering became part of a cycle of moves and salary reductions that ultimately harmed those at the keys and reinforced declining opportunities. "The nomadic nature of the modern operator," one journal moaned in 1875, "makes it an easy matter to reduce salaries aided by the present hard times."[43]

As a consequence, turnover was high. An Ohio operator observed in 1868 that a "majority" of his fellows seldom spent more than three to five years at the work. Two years later, "Tina," a denizen of the City (or Ladies') Department at Western Union headquarters, counted only six operators out of a standing force of 30, including the manager, who had been in the office for more than two and a half years. At Buffalo in 1887, an operator reviewing the past year commented on the markedly high turnover there. "An examination of the number sheets," he

told the Electric Age, "shows a large array of new 'sigs' and it is characteristic of the wandering tendency of telegraphers, that out of a force of 75, fully 20 are new people, and an equal number have come and gone with the summer work." Some operators were on the move from one berth to another, while others were entering or leaving the profession, and reasons as varied as market forces, self-improvement, personal caprice--and, perhaps, a form of resistance to corporate tyranny--propelled this flow of telegraphers.[44]

Seasonal fluctuations based on trade cycles and summer vacations accounted for some of this movement. Resort areas drew operators to staff branch offices in the hotels and recreational facilities to which the affluent fled from the summertime stench and heat of the cities. Operators officially starved of vacations by corporate policy took them indirectly by working the resort-area posts. "As a rule," the Electric Age remarked of the telegraphers about to depart for resort offices in 1886, "the same persons have filled many of these positions for years, and they still delight in the imaginary vacation."[45] Winter, in contrast, with little if any vacationing (at least in the North) and slackened trade, was doubly harsh for operators lacking permanent jobs. But come spring, unattached Knights of the Key would begin their seasonal migration, often to the larger cities, where the sheer size

of the job market offered some hope, sweetened by the exodus of resort-bound telegraphers. "The inevitable sign of Spring is at hand in the presence of numerous weather-beaten and battle scarred itinerant members of the craft, who invariably arrive in New York about this time of year," announced the Electric Age, inaugurating the season for 1887. But the drifting operators could usually expect little more than a place on a Western Union waiting list and sporadic work as an "extra." Edward Delaney, who as "De" wrote the Electric Age's humor column, immortalized the waiting list with a parody of Hamlet's soliloquy that, despite the tongue in cheek, is tinged with bleakness:[46]

> To wait or not to wait? That is the question.
> Whether 'tis better to loaf round the building talking
> Shop and other damphoolishness,
> Or to pack up one's trunk
> And leave for parts unknown
> 'Tis a question of great moment.
> The dread of riding in a box car
> Or being dumped at a way
> Station where there are
> No station houses, gives
> Us pause and makes
> Us rather increase our
> Indebtedness to our landlady
> Here, than to seek other
> Parts. With forty men on the
> Waiting list, what chance
> Hath the fortieth man. Aye, there's the rub.

Surviving records supplement this tale of operators on the move. The Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Western Union office was of modest proportions. It never numbered more than 15 operators (managers and branch men included), and

over the period 1866 to 1900, the average payroll contained but 11 telegraphers. Harrisburg's record book still exists, and its fairly long time span enables us to cautiously generalize about operator turnover and career mobility in the Gilded Age.

The general contours are not surprising: turnover roughly paralleled the boom-bust patterns of the era. Movement increased in the late 1860s, dropped in the early 70s, increased again during the recovery of the late 70s and early 80s, maintained something approximating a plateau through the decade, and then followed the fall and rise of the business cycle in the 1890s. For the 34-year period studied, the average rate of turnover was 43.4% (using a three-year moving average method to compensate for the inevitable snapshot effect of sampling, the rate was virtually the same, at 44.7%). So, as a rule, a bit under half of the Harrisburg staff were coming or going each year. Most who passed through the office doors did not stay very long. Taking five years as a period of minimal stability--one that would enable a messenger to develop into a competent working operator--there were 187 operators (including managers and potential operators in the form of messengers and clerks) who could have remained that long and been recorded within the confines of the payroll book. Of that possible 187, only 19 (a little over 10%) spent five or more years at the place, their

average stay covering 11.8 years. Perhaps most who worked at the office could not have stayed and advanced even if will and industry were present; perhaps a place such as Harrisburg was inevitably a way-station for most. It was for C.L. Laverty, who appeared there in 1873-4 (at $70 a month) and whose subsequent career would remain as obscure as that of most of the others on the Harrisburg payroll had he not wound up as Master Workman of the Philadelphia Brotherhood of Telegraphers during the Great Strike.[47]

The Harrisburg book tells little about most of its subjects beyond their high turnover, but it is more helpful on the fate of those less restless--or more lucky. The men with 5 or more years at the office had tenures that break down as follows:

28	years	1 operator
25	"	"
24	"	"
18	"	"
15	"	"
13	"	"
11	"	"
10	"	"
9	"	4 operators
8	"	2 "
7	"	"
6	"	1 operator
5	"	2 operators

Some of them, like Emil Teupser, made real careers out of the Western Union. Starting as a messenger boy in 1868, he rose to a clerkship the next year (and from

$12 to $25 a month), and by 1871 had again doubled his salary, to $50, now working a wire. Appointed Night Manager in 1872 (at $80 a month), he stayed at the post through the 1870s and 80s, his salary fluctuating and dropping as low as $60. In 1887 though, again rated at $80, Teupser took charge of the Harrisburg office as manager. Neither his position nor salary changed for the next 13 years. Amos Mumma's 24 years at the office bespoke impressive mobility, too. Young Mumma carried messages (at the standard $12 a month) from 1874-8, combined his courier duties with telegraphing the next year, was clerking, at $35, in 1881, then operating, with the same pay, in 1882. The year that Emil Teupser won the manager's desk, 1887, Mumma, too, received a significant promotion, becoming chief operator and simultaneously getting a raise from $45 to $50. In 1890, Mumma's salary jumped to $60. Both his salary and position remained the same through 1900. But long tenure did not guarantee advancement. Harry W. Spahn emerges in the record book as a $40 operator from 1873-8. Spahn may have tired of the key by 1879, for he is then listed as a clerk, still at $40. In 1881, he was back on a wire, this time at a branch office at a local stockyard, where he would spend the next 19 years. His remuneration evidently now changed from straight salary to commission, because the Western Union began paying him monthly amounts ranging from $23.61

to $6.73. How he supplemented these sums--perhaps as a regular stockyard employee--and what his total income was, the records do not say. He may, for all we know, have made a fair living sending and receiving amid the cattle, sheep, and swine. But as a professional operator, even within the small world of the Harrisburg Western Union, Harry Spahn was something of a failure for never reaching the kind of managerial niche that a quarter-century at the key should have earned him. His long tenure was unusual, but his stagnant career may have been all too common.[48]

Market forces, corporate managers, and population vagaries were not alone in creating the world of the telegrapher. Like any social group, operators made themselves as much as others made them.

They made themselves as much as the Western Union made them on the shop floor. Whether in urban wire centers or tank-stops nestled among pines, all operators had a shared work culture that grew out of the nature of the medium itself. For all its giant scope and industrial organization, telegraphy did not fully render its work force into ciphers. Experienced operators could detect subtle variations in sending style since each telegrapher

had a distinctive "fist," a kind of telegraphic fingerprint that set him or her off from another. But even a novice could discern the personal "signs" that Knights and Ladies of the Key adopted to identify themselves while sending or receiving. At Detroit in 1875, for instance, an operator named Mills signed himself "Ms" to his colleagues. Singleton became "Si," Miss C. Edwards was "Ce," and Miss A. Edwards went by the sign "Ae."[49] Telegraphers developed regular partnerships over a shop floor at times hundreds or even thousands of miles wide. Thomas Edison described how one such pairing took shape in the late 1860s:

> When on the New York No. 1 wire, that I worked in Boston, there was an operator named Jerry Borst at the other end. He was a first-class receiver and rapid sender. We made up a scheme to hold this wire, so he changed one letter of the alphabet and I soon got used to it; and finally we changed three letters. If any operator tried to receive from Borst, he couldn't do it, so Borst and I always worked together.

The electric bonds of operators working together could be explicitly social. During lulls in traffic along a circuit, L.C. Hall wrote, "Stories are told, opinions exchanged, and laughs enjoyed, just as if the participants were sitting together at a club." A "very common occurrence" among bored and lonely night railroad operators, one of their number informed the Electric Age in 1888, was a game of checkers played on the key.[50] Loneliness of another kind sometimes had a telegraphic remedy. "Many a

telegraph romance begun 'over the wire,'" remembered Minnie Swan Mitchell, "culminated in marriage." Ella Cheever Thayer's 1879 novel, Wired Love, built its plot around just such a courtship.[51]

Telegraphers did not always treat each other so tenderly. Thomas Hughes, Grand Secretary of the Brotherhood during the Great Strike, mentioned "petty spites between men working together" that his union had reduced. Letters to the editor of telegraphers' journals called attention to boorish manners on the wire. In at least one case, more than pride was injured. Vexed during "an irritable moment" at the key in 1881, Greenville, S.C., operator John Cone managed to insult Reginald de Fevre, his counterpart at Charlotte, N.C. The latter demanded satisfaction, and the two met half way at Gastonia, N.C., to settle the matter with fists at 1 A.M. The 170-pound Cone triumphed. "It was a hard fight," a correspondent to the Operator reported, "and both men were badly punished."[52]

Such violent encounters were rare, but the problem of ill-mannered and arrogant operators was not. Nor did the problem stem simply from flawed character. The premium on speed and skill within the craft--valued as much by the telegraphers as by the company, if for different reasons--engendered tension between operators. "F.D.," of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, ticking off the faults of his

colleagues, ended the list with "tyrannical and ungentlemanly conduct over the wire, and the utter want of consideration on the part of skillful operators for the feelings and sensibilities of those not so expert." The Brotherhood's positive influence that Thomas Hughes had invoked was aimed at precisely this problem. "A member of the brotherhood," he explained a week before the Great Strike, "in sending messages to a fellow-operator, sends to accomodate his ability to receive. It is a case of mutual assistance which redounds to the benefit of all."[53] Even with the best of intentions, it was difficult to avoid the weight and glamor that speed held for members of the profession. In their least divisive form, speed and accuracy found an outlet in contests, sometimes with prizes, such as one in 1903 in Philadelphia with its separate categories of old timers, best all-around, railroad, women, Phillips Code, broker operators, and receiving on typewriter.[54] But speed was central to the telegraphers' craft culture, and its manifestations were not always so restrained. Operator jargon was rich in terms dealing with speed: a fast operator could "rush" or "salt" (overwhelm) an inferior one; the latter, apt to "break" (stop and ask the sender to repeat or slow down), bore the contemptuous epithets "plug" or "ham." To leave such lowly status behind as quickly as possible, as "De" made clear in 1883 in "A Check-Boy's Song," was the goal of every

budding operator:[55]

> I'll learn to telegraph, if I can,
> Says I to myself, says I;
> I'll be what they call a very fast man,
> Says I to myself, says I;
> I'll rush all the men that work with me,
> Then in the papers my name I'll see,
> Then I'll be a great man, do you see?
> Says I to myself, says I.

"Rushing" a less competent operator was all the more fun when the victim was a rural telegrapher. An 1876 contributor to the Operator captured the ethos of the aggressive young urban Knight of the Key thusly:[56]

> At work the best man is the best rushaire,
> And must always give his greatest care
> To salting the plugs and making 'em swair;
> You once were a plug yourself, remembaire,
> And now, of course, it's only fair
> That you appear as the revengaire;
> So raise all the music you can in the air,
> And salt all from plug to managaire.
> Salt, brothers, salt with care,
> Salt every country managaire!

"Salting" and "rushing" were sometimes less telegraphic sadism than rough-edged camaraderie. This was certainly true of a ritual that the Operator dubbed "Hazing a Freshman." The "freshman," a novice telegrapher, was often newly arrived from a rural district. The hazing might involve sending ludicrous copy to the ingenuous candidate--telegrams addressed to "L.E. Fant" or "Lynn C. Doyle"--but was more often a straightforward "salting." It ended, as a rule, when the neophyte, on the verge of collapse or tears, looked up to find himself surrounded by a knot of grinning operators who had been enjoying the

growing frustration and discomfort of the inductee. "If he accepts the situation as a joke," an 1879 account of a hazing explained, "he is initiated, but if he becomes angered, he is still a 'Freshman.'"[57]

However pregnant the rite was with the tensions that divided telegraphers of differing skill and backgrounds, it also bespoke ties that knit a particular set of workers into a national community. Even the ungainly hick operator was an operator first and a hick second. "Country operators," noted L.C. Hall, "when they get leave to come to town, are drawn irresistably to the city telegraph office. However strange the city may be, in the central commercial office or the railroad dispatcher's den they are sure to find others who speak their language, and with whom they may fraternize and feel at home." They shared occupational ills, such as consumption and "operators' cramp."[58] Through their journals they warned one another about dishonorable members of their profession, such as Charles H. Biller, evidently much given to lying, or a "Dead Beat, Scoundrel, Villain, etc., etc." named Will H. Swan, who in 1887 had left behind him a trail of defrauded merchants and at least one wife with children while attempting to take on another spouse. Operators also solicited funds for those in distress, as they did for May Harris, an 18-year-old orphan from Xenia, Ohio, who, seeking the gentler climate of California to restore her

health in 1887, broke down when she arrived there friendless. The sense of an operators' community was pervasive enough to furnish metaphors for so familiar an event as the one that the Telegrapher's Chicago correspondent announced this way in 1875:[59]

> Our friend Mr. Leroy Robinson, Manager of the NorthWestern Company's Minneapolis, Minn., office, has had a male sounder switched into his family circuit. It was ready for operating its lungs April 22, 1875.

Taking the stuff of their workday world and fashioning it into a unique craft culture, the Knights and Ladies of the Key identified themselves as telegraphers. But they simultaneously located themselves within a broader social band--that of a lower-middle class just beginning to crystallize in late 19th-century America. Operators identified themselves as part of a class in manifold ways. Intermittant unionization and the Great Strike were two such expressions. They were most important, but they were also atypical. It is equally important to look at the more usual and persistent ways in which the operators perceived their economic and social position--in short, at their cultural trappings--for they would act, or not act, based on just such perceptions. Culture is both mirror and prism, reflecting and refracting the underlying realities of class.[60]

The most obvious sign of the telegraph operator's self-defined world was his dress. Clad in suit, collars,

and cuffs, he stood out amid an American working population still largely composed of farmers, laborers, and craftsmen. On the surface, an operator was indistinguishable from a representative of the traditional middle class: he might as well be a doctor, merchant, lawyer, or clergyman. And these were callings that evoked sobriety and responsibility, prudence and solidity, thrift, moderation, foresight, and propriety: qualities, in short, of the classic bourgeois.[61]

But bourgeois dress did not always mean bourgeois behavior. Some operators displayed what seemed an embarrassing disjuncture between their costumes and their roles, with the "fast" and irresponsible element among the craft a frequent and anguished topic in the telegraphic journals of the era. The reputation was widespread early in the industry's history. "Instead of the gay, reckless, and fast young man of former days," wrote a New York operator in 1865, "our ranks are filled by worthy, intelligent, and moral men, many with brilliant intelligence, who are fit ornaments to any class of society."[62] His optimism was premature. Throughout the 1860s, 70s, and 80s, complaints of "ungentlemanly" telegraphers were frequent. Both on and off the wires, operators were foul-mouthed. They packed the air of telegraph offices with the stench of cigar smoke and mottled the floors with the revolting end-products of chewing. Things

grew so bad at Western Union headquarters that formal decrees banned smoking and "spitting upon the floors or from the windows" of the building.[63]

Jets of tobacco juice sailing from the upper tiers of 195 Broadway were a poor advertisement for the firm. So were drunken operators. Intemperance was enough of a problem for the Western Union to have a column in its house organ in 1869, entitled "The Dark Side," listing dismissals from the company for intoxication. Drinking problems among telegraphers harmed the profession as well as its largest employer, and condemnation of operator alcoholism continued to claim space on editorial pages. An especially intractable variant of the telegraphic toper was the "tramp" or "bum" operator who combined high geographic mobility, chronically low finances, and an addiction to drink. The tramp personified the blighted character often ascribed to the era's telegraphers, and while he was an extreme case, many operators, though to a lesser degree, shared some of the tramp's failings.[64] "I have noticed," a woman telegrapher observed in 1880, "that operators, as a general thing, are inclined to be fast (the gentlemen, I mean; your pardon, gentlemen, but it's so, and you know it). . . ." Theodore Vail knew it. Although he would one day head a corporate empire even greater than the Western Union, in 1865 he was an ordinary operator working in New York. In March of that

year, the 20-year-old Vail confessed to his diary:[65]

> Staying up late of nights playing Billiards and drinking lager is not what young men should be doing and for one I am determined to stop it.

What young men should or should not have been doing is less important here than the fact that they were young men. That, indeed, accounts for a good deal of the "fast" reputation that the Knights of the Key earned, for as in other aspects of the craft's fate, large numbers of youthful males made a difference. So did a calling that encouraged frequent movement from place to place. Nor should we forget the pull that an urban environment could have exercised on a country boy starting out in life. The city, after all, offered a kind of gritty education at the bar-rail, pool table, theater lobby, and whore's bed. That was why such institutions as the YMCA had emerged in the first place.

How extensive the "fast" operator problem was is impossible to say. Most operators, even most young operators, were neither wastrels nor sots. But enough were, and the temptation real enough, to prod spokesmen for the craft to sound frequent tocsins. Some saw the generally worsening plight of operators as the logical outcome of dissolute living. "Operators have no right to complain of partiality or injustice in their employers because they do not receive a better salary or a higher position,"

admonished the Operator in 1874, "so long as they spend their leisure hours in the gratification of their appetites and their money upon tobacco, drink, billiards and theatres." A year later, the journal pressed the lesson home by drawing up an itemized list of annual expenses of "average unmarried operators" in cities, $254.80 of which--22% of the total--was supposed to be thrown out on drink and cigars. "Create an independent spirit by having a little money," the Operator counseled readers, "and you will have more real power than if you belonged to a dozen of leagues [i.e., unions]."[66] Charges of thriftlessness among telegraphers were not limited to conservative voices. Socialist and labor activist P.J. McGuire, a staunch friend of the Brotherhood during the Great Strike, told a Senate committee that the operators' "impulsive" nature had fundamentally weakened their rebellion against the Western Union because of insufficient funds. "As a class," McGuire testified, "they live from hand to mouth. They dress well and live freely, and they do not generally save much, so that even one week's idleness comes very severely upon them, because they have made themselves accustomed to better conditions than most workers." An Operator columnist put it more wryly and succinctly: "It has become almost proverbial that an operator is wealthy only twice a month, the 1st and 15th."[67]

An amorphous social position compounded an often precarious economic one. Clearly not a worker in the traditional sense, neither did the telegrapher conform to a genuinely bourgeois mold. In his own eyes, at least, what was he?

The terms that operators used to describe their field might provide a clue. The Telegraphers' Advocate declared that the "service may now be classed as a profession" because it united "clerical labor" and scientific knowledge. Elsewhere it referred to "mental labor" of telegraphers. John McClelland described his fellows as "a steady, sober, and intelligent class of workers." Long-time operator Alfred H. Seymour used the phrase "other classes of workingmen." John Campbell spoke of "skilled labor of this kind" and "some of the other trades."[68] The word "craft," with its artisanal overtones, was often used. Sifting through these terms demands care, though, since such words as "labor," "class," "trade," and "worker" may have carried important nuances that have evaporated with time. But even allowing for that, the imprecision and variety of the terms remain.

Perhaps it is more useful to ask how operators viewed themselves in relation to others. Despite what to 20th-century ears seems a rather free use of words implying working-class status to describe themselves, there are signs that operators consciously, and at times invidiously,

set themselves off from blue-collar folk. This was especially so in complaints of inadequate pay. "A telegrapher's work is of the highest order of skilled labor," asserted a Boston operator two days before the Great Strike, "and he receives the pay that would be thrown to an ordinary laborer." Members of the craft, an 1882 Brotherhood recruiting circular aimed at railroad operators pointed out, "often find themselves receiving smaller wages than the trackmen, firemen, brakemen and other unskilled labor employed." Remuneration for telegraphers, argued a Brotherhood spokesman in Chicago, should at a minimum be "equal to the pay of good mechanics."[69] But the difference between operators and regular workers was not simply a matter of pay. Telegraphers were also brain workers. "The telegraphers as a profession," the Electric Age assured readers in 1886, "by actual comparison, is [sic] vastly superior intellectually to the railroad engineers." "It certainly requires as much skill and a great deal more education to send and receive over the wires than it does to lay bricks or manipulate a jack-plane," a New York operator commented. Brotherhood leaders John McClelland, Eugene O'Connor, and John Campbell all stressed the centrality of mental facility in the telegrapher's stock-in-trade--in marked contrast to the mass of contemporary wage workers.[70]

The operators' relation to the contemporary middle

class was another matter. That telegraphy was a white-collar occupation (whatever the subterranean economic realities) was of prime importance. White-collar work did exert an undeniable appeal to many seeking a career. Not to all, of course; the son of a successful labor aristocrat might have looked upon entering a clerkship (rather than following in his father's footsteps) as a distinct loss of skill, autonomy, "manliness," perhaps even money. But others, farm youth or the children of the unskilled, for whom manual labor had less rewarding connotations, may have eagerly shed overalls for a ready-made suit. A Chicago Tribune editorial called telegraphy "employment . . . of the clean-fingered, genteel kind," and John Campbell told a Senate probe that young men were "extremely anxious" to enter the field, thinking it "more respectable than some of the other trades." This notion of "respectable" is tricky. Walter Phillips' fictional Irish-born messenger boy, Patsy Flanagan, went through the following blue to white-collar metamorphosis:[71]

> He appeared on the evening of his succession to the night clerkship in a white shirt and a collar --a new departure for him. . . . He adhered to his hobnailed shoes for several months; but one day they gave place to "Oxford ties," a cravat followed, and so, little by little, the rough boy was transformed into quite a tidy young man.

What Patsy actually thought about such a change we can only guess, since a Yankee farmer's son, and not an unskilled Irish immigrant, had created him. Closer to a

first-hand account, although hardly uncolored, was the reaction that Andrew Carnegie later set down of his move from a textile mill basement to a telegraph office. The gnomish robber baron fondly recalled that he had been "lifted into paradise, yes, heaven, as it seemed to me, with newspapers, pens, pencils, and sunshine about me."[72]

Few Gilded Age telegraphers described their situation as heavenly, but the fact that they wore white collars and were educated above the working-class average placed them, as they saw things, somewhere in the middling strata. "With the amount of intelligence and general information possessed by the average telegrapher," an Iowa operator maintained in 1883, "he is entitled to move in the best social circles"; and entitled to "just as much respect in ordinary society as a doctor, a lawyer, or a politician," added John McClelland before a Senate panel the same year. His colleague John Campbell was a bit equivocal, though, when one senator asked him:

> Q. How do they compare as a whole, in your judgment, with the men that are made into lawyers, and doctors, and ministers, and merchants?
> A. They are probably not equal to that class.
> Q. I mean originally, primarily?
> A. Well, I don't know. They are probably equal in that way.

Some lawyers, doctors, ministers, and merchants doubtless looked with bald contempt on such as a telegrapher. "Up in Amherst, some of the ginger-pop professors used to

sniff a little at my enthusiasm about telegraphy," military operator Thomas L. Somerby wrote a friend in 1861. "They regarded it as a trade and not just the thing for a college man."[73]

How widespread such attitudes were, and how painful they were to operators we cannot know. If telegraphers moved in "the best of social circles," they rarely included well-to-do doctors, lawyers, ministers, merchants, or Amherst College faculty. Still, while distinct from the solid, "old" middle class, the social niche that operators chiseled out for themselves was not spurious. Their work setting did demand a standard of dress. They were "required to make a better appearance than other classes of workingmen," Alfred Seymour said of his fellow operators, "to dress better and to live a great deal better, and they have a little more pride perhaps than the majority of other workers, and their money goes in that way. The business is such," he explained, "that you may say they are on inspection and parade nearly all the time."[74]

Nor did the parade end at the operating room door, since cutting a suitably middle-class figure involved appropriate levels of consumption in the home as well as respectable attire. It meant, in the words of the Telegraphers' Advocate, providing "a decent living for themselves and their families."[75] But they had to be

able to afford families in the first place, and some blamed the high proportion of single operators on the meager rewards of the craft. "[D]emanding in domestic life surroundings approximating to refinement," wrote the editor of a Boston daily, the young telegrapher had to eschew marriage, a condition that even Norvin Green confirmed in admitting that operators who wed usually left the field.[76] Those who did have family responsibilities claimed that a telegrapher's remuneration was barely adequate or even inadequate. As early as 1871, the Telegrapher asserted that even the highest-paid big-city operator could but "barely" provide a respectable living standard for their families, "however modest and moderate may be their aspirations." Spokesmen for the craft echoed the charges at the time of the Great Strike. Alfred H. Seymour, a 30-year veteran of the key and former manager who had cast his lot with the Brotherhood, told inquiring senators that his pay gave "only a bare living, leaving nothing to save." Harry Orr and Eugene O'Connor, both family men and first-class operators, worked overtime or moonlighted to augment their $70 and $75 a month salaries--evidently a common practice. O'Connor even sublet part of the house he rented to reduce the pressure on his family's coffers. "It is almost impossible," a Brooklyn operator wailed in 1883, "for a married man to live by the sweat of his brow in this place."[77]

What a "bare living" or "starvation wages"[78] meant to a telegrapher was not necessarily what it meant to a day laborer, perhaps even to a skilled worker. Senator Wilkinson Call asked John Campbell whether he meant to say that operators' salaries were "utterly inadequate to the support of a family." "Oh, well," replied the Brotherhood chief, "they might manage to get along, but it would be in such a manner that they would not be at all satisfied." John Costello, of Brooklyn, gave the senators an idea of what did satisfy married telegraphers. Costello, at the key since 1869, rented rooms in a house. Rent and necessities, with "no luxuries whatsoever," took $65 of his $75 monthly paycheck. So the $75, one senator inquired, was "insufficient" for a couple to live on? "Yes, sir," Costello answered, then adding, "Of course, if I would live in the slums of the city I could live on a little less, but I do not propose to do that."[79] James E. Smith probably did live in "the slums of the city." Head of the linemen within the New York Brotherhood, Smith, who likely took around $65 a month home, packed himself, his wife, and four children into "four little rooms"--at $11 a month--"in a tenement house in a tenement neighborhood." Costello and Smith lived in the same metropolitan area in 1883, both joined the Brotherhood and struck against the Western Union, and their incomes were different by only about 38¢ a day. But both probably had considerably

different ideas of what such words as "decent," "insufficient," or "luxuries" meant.[80]

To put the operators' concerns about incomes and living standards in some kind of perspective, we should ask how the Knights of the Key fared, in terms of actual purchasing power, over the postbellum decades. Fixing telegraphers' average nominal salaries during the period is possible, although differences in skill, sex, and location inevitably skew such figures. Still, telegraphers undoubtedly had higher nominal salaries in the Golden Age of the 1860s and early 1870s. First-class operators received $90-$125 a month, while all operators perhaps averaged around $70. After the Sliding Scale of 1876 and the general decline of the 1870s, telegrapher pay figures dipped. The wage range cited by the Brotherhood during the Great Strike--all commercial operators, $54; railroad operators, $39; first-class operators, $80-$85--seems fairly accurate, although the Western Union's figure for average commercial operators' pay ($65) appears equally reasonable if the tables upon which it was based were honestly compiled. The Brotherhood quotations for first-class operators may have actually been generous, since testimony during the Senate hearings suggested an even lower bracket of $70-$80. By the 1890s the figures changed little, if anything declining still more. At Syracuse, New York, an office with a force of around 34 operators

through the decade, the salary average for 1890-1900 was but $48.31 a month.[81]

But economic well-being depended as much on the relative movement of prices as on nominal salary rates. Prices, on the whole, declined, and so the figures that appeared in Western Union payroll ledgers must be read in the context of an era of general deflation. When nominal salaries are converted to constant dollars to reflect this trend, the results are instructive. The briefest way to approach the matter is through a kind of wage biography stretching from 1870 to 1907. The figures are for first-class Morse operators. Nominal salaries are given first; real wages, in constant 1910-14 dollars, follow in parentheses:[82]

CITY	1870	1883	1907
New York	$90-$120 ($66.66-$88.88)	$80-$85 ($74.25-$84.15)	$75-$85 ($78.86-$89.37)
Chicago	$90-$115 ($66.66-$85.18)	$75-$80 ($74.25-$79.20)	$75-$90 ($78.86-$94.63)
Philadelphia	$90-$105 ($66.66-$77.77)	$75-$80 ($74.25-$79.20)	$75-$88 ($78.86-$92.53)
Boston	$90-$105 ($66.66-$77.77)	$70-$75 ($69.30-$74.25)	$70-$85 ($73.60-$89.37)
Buffalo	$85-$105 ($62.96-$77.77)	$70-$80 ($69.30-$79.20)	$65-$82.50 ($68.34-$86.75)

CITY	1870	1883	1907
New Orleans	$100-$125 ($74.07-$95.59)	$75-$85 ($74.25-$84.15)	$70-$77 ($73.60-$80.96)
Richmond	$90-$115 ($66.66-$85.18)	$70-$80 ($69.30-$70.20)	$66-$77 ($69.40-$80.96)
Omaha	$90-$110 ($66.66-$81.48)	$75-$80 ($74.25-$79.20)	$70-$85 ($73.60-$89.37)
San Francisco	$90-$115 ($66.66-$85.18)	$80-$85 ($79.20-$84.15)	$80-$88 ($84.12-$92.53)

Two things are immediately apparent. First, operators in the lower end of this range ($90-$105) either held their own or made modest gains in purchasing power through 1883 and in most cases, beyond that date. For operators with salaries lower than those shown, the gains through deflation could be dramatic. A glance at the careers of three Harrisburg Western Union men makes this plain. V.P. Smith, who tapped a key there in 1872, rated $40 a month; by 1884, he had graduated to a $60 position, an increase of 50%. But in constant dollars, Smith's actual pay went from $29.41 to $64.51, a gain of around 119%. R.B. Zeigler, the office chief operator, took home $75 in 1866. Although his pay fluctuated through the 1870s, and went as high as $90, he was down to $80 by 1886, his last year at Harrisburg. In nominal terms, after 18 years he had gained but $5 a month, a bit over 6%;

in real terms, though, the span was actually from $43.10 in 1866 to $97.56 in 1886, a 126% rise. Emil Teupser did even better. His 1871 pay as an operator is listed as $50 a month, and by 1887, when he became manager, it had grown to $80, a 60% boost. But again, when adjusted for deflation, Teupser's salary had in fact gone from $38.46 to $94.11, a jump of more than twice the apparent rate, at 144%.[83]

Conversely, the economic elite of the telegraphers--those making $110-$125 a month--lost ground. Their actual losses were not as sharp as their apparent ones, to be sure: dropping from $125 to $85 looks less breathtaking when changed into the constant dollar sums of $95.59 to $84.15. The erosion was nonetheless real, and the high-paid operator's perception of that erosion is important in understanding how the Knights of the Key reacted to pay cuts. One important point needs stressing, though. The operator's perception of an ever-diminishing Western Union paycheck was further colored by whether the same operator experienced successive cuts (went, say, from $100 to $90 to $80), or whether he experienced a constriction of the salary range as he came up through the ranks. Again, Harrisburg furnishes concrete examples. Both R.B. Zeigler and Amos Mumma spent many years (18 and 24, respectively) there and doubtless knew each other. They both made gains in real income, although we do not know whether both may

have been disappointed with what seemed either stagnation or painfully slow advance. But if such disappointment existed, it probably looked different to Zeigler, slipping and sliding from $90 to $85 to $80, than to Mumma, steadily stepping up from $35 to $45, and then, at $50, replacing Zeigler as chief. On the one hand, Mumma may well have known that the year he entered the office as a $12-a-month messenger, 1874, the same chief he replaced was making $90; on the other hand, Mumma was undoubtedly rising in both rank and salary. What his standards were--those of 1887 or the Golden Age--will have shaded his perceptions of how the craft was treating him.

In sum, reduced opportunities for Gilded Age telegraphers seem to have coincided with mild economic gains in the long run. Also in the operators' favor was fairly steady employment. Assuming that an operator kept his job, he could expect income throughout the year, unlike, for instance, a mechanic or laborer limited to working in temperate seasons.[84] Whether operators did so poorly compared to skilled blue-collar workers, as they and their supporters charged, is uncertain; in making their case, they at times overstated craftsmen's incomes.[85] In relation to middle-class living standards, the operators' relative position is even more murky, since we know so little about white-collar income for the period. If the $125-a-month clerks that Alfred Seymour invoked were

representative, then most operators were indeed underprivileged. And if someone as unquestionably middle class as a high school principal in Cincinnati or St. Louis is the model, the telegrapher's $75 a month paled before the $2,600 a year of those administrators. Even an ordinary male high school teacher in St. Louis, again in 1883, outdistanced most first-class operators with his $1,800 annual earnings. Not all educators were so affluent. Men who taught in Barnstable County, Massachusetts, that same year commanded $61.57 a month, close to the operators' average, but since a school year presumably ran only 10 months, less overall than a first-class operator received. And remote Franklin County, in Massachusetts too, granted male teachers only $38.89 for a month's service.[86] High school principals and teachers were relatively few in number in 1883, but those who taught in one-room village schools--and telegraphers--were less so.

If many operators felt deprived of income befitting a middle-class calling, they nevertheless often adhered to respectable and "refined" social forms. During the Great Strike, as the Brotherhood sought to maintain a gentlemanly image, an inventive New York member came up with the term "contumist" to replace the harsh and plebeian "scab." After the strike, the Operator exhorted readers to "relegate to oblivion" "trades-union slang and demagoguery" such as that coarse word typified. The stress

on sobriety during walkout, although as much tactical as cultural, still converged with a general urge to respectable behavior--an urge no doubt enhanced by the "fast" reputation that plagued the craft.[87]

"It is a nice, genteel occupation--telegraphing," Jay Gould assured the Senate Education and Labor Ccmmittee. Gould's words, always suspect, seem nevertheless in a contemporary sense to have hit the mark here.[88] "Genteel," in this context, does not have the traditional upper-class connotation. The gentility of a telegraph operator was not that of an E.L. Godkin or a North American Review. It was a vague mix of values that seems to have comprised an almost pathological concern with "correct" manners, dress, speech, and a striving for "cultivation" and social mobility. It was not simply a matter of respectability--workers, too, had that concern--but respectability in a peculiarly marginal white-collar context.

The evidence for gentility such as a telegrapher understood it is elusive but suggestive, and rests primarily in the journals aimed at operators. The journals, naturally enough, mostly dealt with the technical and professional concerns of operators, but they also contained such middlebrow literary forms as humorous or sentimental poems or prose sketches, often with a telegraphic slant. There were advertisements as well. By the far the bulk of them were for the paraphernalia of telegraphy--keys,

sounders, batteries, books on technical and scientific subjects--but there was something beyond this. In the mid-80s, the leading journal in the field, the Operator, ran advertisements that seem a kind of relief map of the cultural topography of lower-middle-class Americans such as the telegraphers. These are, one must admit, only advertisements, and there is no certainty that telegraphers bought what they offered. But the fact that merchandisers were confident enough to run the displays suggests that the Knights of the Key furnished a likely market for the stuff.

Published on the doorstep of the Great Strike, the July 16, 1883 issue of the Operator contains an especially rich collection of these offerings. The items fall roughly into three divisions--gentility, self-improvement, and what one might freely call "kitsch"--and deserve a closer look and an attempt to explain their cohabitation of the same pages.

The gentility literature was of the straightforward etiquette-book variety, and no less than three such volumes (Martine's Hand-Book of Etiquette and Guide to True Politeness, The Standard Book of Politeness, and Genteel Behavior) solicited the operators' attention and coins. One could acquire kindred graces, too, by buying Ready-Made Autograph Album Verses, Young Americans Letter Writer, or Prof. Baron's Complete Instructor in All the Society Dances

of America. Once accepted into "our best society," an operator might enthrall a parlor audience by mastering the contents of Beecher's Recitations and Readings and declaiming its "Humorous, Serious, Dramatic . . . Prose and Poetical Selections in Dutch, French, Yankee, Irish, Backwoods, Negro and other Dialects." And when social concerns narrowed to more intimate dimensions, the operator could turn to Confidential Advice to the Unmarried or The Mystery of Love-Making Solved.

The advertisements also included tools for the autodidact. The Golden Key to Business Life contained a wealth of information on the ways of the world of commerce, and its publisher promised that it would "give a Farmer's Boy a Perfect Business Education that would cost $3,000 to get in School or College." The Golden Key cost only 25¢. So did The American Business Man and Bookkeeper's Practical Guide, which covered much the same ground. Ambitious telegraphers could also send for instruction in shorthand, find out "How to Make $10 a Day Without Capital," and even, if so inclined, "Learn the Sense of 3,000 French Words in one Hour."

Those more intent on levity than learning might choose to order Old Gypsey Madge's Fortune Teller, or to uncover The Secrets of Ancient and Modern Magic. On payment of a dime, operators received "The Sensitive Mermaid," a tiny, flexible mannikin that, held in the palm, indicated

the holder's temperament by its contortions. The Electric Sleeve Buttons moved, too. Containing "figures of Bugs, Turtles, Horses, etc., etc.," or "a ballet girl, who goes through every movement known to the most finished danseuse," these cufflinks, by the slightest hand motions, induced their lively inhabitants to produce activity on the wearer's wrists "both life like and graceful." And on the same page, but in a class by themselves, were the "Advantage or Marked Back Playing Cards"--"such," their seller candidly explained, "as Gamblers use to cheat With."

What seems striking about most of these offerings is the dual stress on refinement and mobility. The etiquette books promised, as one of their ads had it, to "enable every person to rub off the rough husks of ill-breeding and neglected education"--husks that had presumably formed in urban working-class neighborhoods or on Mid-western farms. For a class drawing upon diverse recruits for an unprecedented kind of employment, with its cultural identity fluid and tentative, the appeal of the pre-fabricated gentility that these manuals hawked is understandable. The preoccupation with mobility makes sense, too. For a calling whose Golden Age was past and whose members found increasingly less reason to want to call themselves telegraphers for life, escape from the key to bigger and better things--whether by the methodical study of a commercial primer or the more dubious route of

the "Paul Brothers Violet Ink Secret"--was a reasoned decision. The mobility theme in the ads was pervasive. "Your Manners May Be Your Fortune" topped the copy of one etiquette book offering, and even pulling live rabbits out of a hat had entrepreneurial implications. "$1,000 a night has been received at the door," the magic manual's sales pitch suggestively nudged the reader, "to see these very tricks performed."

The mass-produced gentility and self-betterment (both of which appealed to individual solutions to social dissatisfaction) conform to what we know about the operators' world. But what about the kitsch--how do you reconcile autograph album verses and "hints on carving and wine at the table" with marked cards or the Electric Sleeve Button danseuse and her animal friends?

On one level, you cannot. They are incongruous, even ludicrous. But on another level, their very disjuncture makes cultural sense if they reflect a social reality itself unsettled, contradictory, and tension-ridden. Many male telegraphers stood with one foot in a Brussels-carpeted parlor and the other on a free-lunch bar-rail. A class that was yet evolving produced an equally halting and unstable set of forms. What's more, the ads in the Operator suggest that the lines dividing classes (and their attendent cultures) are more a matter of overlapping no-man's lands than precise frontiers punctuated by neatly-

striped crossing barriers. Even apparently similar forms may have meant very different things to different classes. Self-improvement for a skilled worker, for example, could mean the sort of personal and community enrichment that the phrase "eight hours for what we will" signified; to a telegrapher or clerk it might simply mean upward mobility or incipient entrepreneurship. Likewise with elaborate etiquette: What an ambitious operator might see as a wedge into a more rarefied social sphere may have evolved within its original bourgeois setting for other purposes.[89]

Not that the intense lower-middle-class concern with genteel manners was simply opportunistic. Like any other class, it sought, however clumsily, to define and protect its social space through its cultural forms, and it sought to establish its social self-respect. Perhaps that concern with personal deportment and interest in middlebrow aesthetics that Leon Fink, in discussing Gilded Age Knights of Labor has dubbed "popular gentility," best resembles the mood and mannerisms of telegraphers of the period. A call for self-improvement might focus as much on elevation as mobility. The Operator rebuked readers in 1874 for wasting time on idle amusement and trashy literature. Instead, it advised, read Thackeray, Swift, Cervantes, Harper's, Atlantic Monthly, the Nation; visit local historic sites in Eastern cities; study scientific principles. "The price of a ticket to a third-class

theatre," the editor pointed out, "will buy a textbook."[90]

In addition to what telegraphers may have read, what they actually did reveals much about their values and outlook. Some of them would try to pad the sharp edges with which a capricious market economy threatened so many by joining mutual benefit societies. Unlike similar organizations among workers, the ones to which operators usually belonged were quasi-official appendages of the Western Union. Boston's Telegraphers' Mutual Aid and Literary Association or the Philadelphia Telegraphers' Aid Society, both active in the late 1880s, may have been independent, but the largest such body, the Telegraphers' Mutual Benefit Association, with headquarters at 195 Broadway, was not. Both operators and managers joined the latter. In restricted numbers, the Magnetic Club in New York also admitted both managers and operators where they mixed technological interests and conviviality. Limited to 100 members, the Club in 1888 could induce former Brotherhood activists Tom O'Reilly and J.B. Taltavall as well as the Western Union's William Dealy to hear shop talk and break bread in the same room.[91]

Gilded Age operators pursued more vigorous forms of socializing, too. As early as 1868, St. Louis' Western Union office boasted a baseball nine whose captain, J.H. French, also supervised his teammates during working hours as their chief operator. The Journal of the Telegraph lauded

the team's efforts, observing that "an hour or two [sic] exhilarating enjoyment in the pure, fresh air" was far preferable "than to knock about billiard saloons and bar-rooms till the 'wee sma' hours, as some (I was going to say many) of our profession do." But baseball and lager did mix at a "free and easy meeting" in 1875 at Hoboken, New Jersey, where operators from the Western Union and rival Atlantic & Pacific competed on the diamond, in a footrace, and then repaired to a local restaurant for food, drink, and musical diversion.[92]

The Hoboken revelers' beery waltzing had been confined to the all-male company present, but Knights of the Key often exchanged sweat-stained jerseys for their more accustomed starched collars and suits and, with feminine companionship, enjoyed the sort of dances, dinners, and entertainments that typified the era's popular gentility. Announcements of telegraphers' hops and balls appeared frequently in telegraphic journals. Amateur theatricals and musicales also reinforced worktime bonds between operators. The "Merry Meeting Club," formed by members of Chicago's Western Union force, presented an evening of music, recitations, and tableaux vivant in 1874, very much like gatherings in other cities throughout the 70s and 80s that were fixtures of operator social life. By the time of the Great Strike, Brooklyn had an annual telegraphers' concert of three years' standing. The program

at the 1883 affair included piano and vocal solos and duets and "humorous recitations" by the ubiquitous Edward Delaney.[93] As was often the case, the evening closed with a ball, where operators led wives, daughters, sisters or sweethearts through the waltzes, schottisches, and quadrilles of the day. And some of them also danced with the young women at whose sides they worked the key, women with whom they shared both the operating room and an evolving lower-middle-class world.

N O T E S

[1]"Fellow" because this chapter is a social and economic portrait of essentially the male majority of telegraphers. Although they share much with the men, I will explore the women operators and their world in Chapter IV below.

[2]See the following Census abstracts: Ninth Census (1870), Vol. I, pp. 676, 688, 707; Tenth Census (1880), Vol. I, pp. 757, 778, 794; Eleventh Census (1890), Vol. I, Pt. II, pp. 304, 374-375; Twelfth Census (1900), Vol. II, Pt. II, p. 506.

[3]Ninth Census, Vol. I, pp. 706-707; Tenth Census, Vol. I, p. 757; Eleventh Census, Vol. I, Pt. II, pp. 356-357.

The 1870 census nativity figures indiscriminately mix males and females and all the figures before 1900 include non-telegraphers. These are unavoidable distortions to keep in mind when judging these statistics. I think the generalizations still hold, however.

[4]Eleventh Census, Vol. I, Pt. II, p. 415.

The proportion of single operators among the women was far higher. Roughly 90% were unmarried, 6% married, and around 3.6% widowed or divorced.

[5]Quoted in the Operator, Mar. 1, 1874.

[6]JT, Feb. 15, 1871; EA, Oct. 1 and Nov. 1, 1886.

On rural origins of women operators, see, e.g., Ella Cheever Thayer, Wired Love (New York, 1879), pp. 28-29; JT, May 2, 1870 and July 15, 1876; the Telegrapher, Jan. 2, 1875; Walter P. Phillips, Sketches Old and New (New York, 1897), pp. 49-57, 75-88, 105-114.

[7]Rugg did a brief stint at Troy before returning to manage the Saratoga office. JT, Feb. 15, 1871.

[8]Among immigrant operators, Canadians were perhaps more significant than would seem at first. Two men active in the Brotherhood during the Great Strike, John Mitchell and John McClelland, were Canadian-born. BH, July 23, 1883.

[9]NYT, July 21, 1883; EA, Jan. 1, 1887; Phillips, Sketches, pp. 91-101. Phillips was general manager of the

United Press in the late 1880s.

[10]John Swinton's Paper, Mar. 13, 1887 (hereafter cited as JSP); EA, Nov. 1, 1886; Telegrapher, Sept. 11, 1875. On Irish backgrounds, see also Chapts. IV and V below.

In the aftermath of the Great Strike, the TA reported harassment of former Brotherhood members by an Assistant Superintendent Irwin whom it contemptuously identified as "the only Irishman, with one exception, in the telegraph business, who is ashamed to acknowledge his nationality." TA, Sept. 1, 1883.

The question of working-class origins is both very important and very elusive in the case of the men. Where ethnicity and class are often linked, as in the case of the Irish, there seems good reason to conclude that telegraphy offered mobility into a white-collar (if not classically "middle class") occupation for a significant number of urban working-class youth. A check of census manuscript schedules would be an additional source to explore, but, since most male operators (unlike the women) probably did not live at home, their class origins (via their father's occupation) would be harder to gauge. By including messenger boys, who were often operators in embryo, a fuller picture might develop. But determining class from a father's occupation can mask and distort notions of mobility if the operator's career is seen as a simple transition from father's calling to telegraphy. Mortimer Shaw, for example, son of an Illinois farmer, would nominally be of "old" middle-class background. But Shaw's odyssey to the key involved not only running telegraph messages, but holding a rural teacher's certificate (at the age of 15, which rendered it useless for him), and working as a railroad brakeman, sawmill laborer, and paper carrier. This sort of career fluidity is very important; it is also, unfortunately, usually lost track of. On Shaw's career, see EA, Nov. 1, 1886; for an article describing New York City telegraph "colleges" that defrauded "the poorer class of young boys and girls" who saw telegraphy as an enticing career, see TA, Oct. 16, 1885. On class and ethnicity, specifically on the Irish social and economic experience in the period, see Daniel Walkowitz's perceptive case studies of Troy and Cohoes in Worker City, Company Town (Urbana, 1978), Ch. I, and passim.

[11]U.S. Senate, Report of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital (Washington, D.C., 1885), Vol. I, p. 895; Operator, July 1, 1879; EA, Nov. 1, 1886, Oct. 1, 1887 and Feb. 1, 1888; David Homer Bates, Lincoln in the Telegraph Office (New York, 1907), p. 360. For other examples of operator to manager mobility,

see James D. Reid, The Telegraph in America (New York, 1886 ed.), Ch. XLVI passim; EA, Sept. 1, Oct. 1 and Nov. 16, 1886; Operator, Feb. 15, 1879.

During and after the Great Strike, several writers made the ironic discovery that a number of current chiefs and managers of the Western Union, who had helped to break the Brotherhood, had themselves been active as young operators either in the National Telegraphers' Union of the 1860s or the Telegraphers' Protective League's 1870 walkout against the Western Union. They included Press Agent William B. Somerville, District Superintendent Walter C. Humstone, District Supt. Thomas Roche, William J. Dealy, Dist. Supt. John E. Zeublin, Asst. Manager Thomas Brennan, Asst. Supt. H.H. Redding, Night Chief John Sabine (all of New York, except Roche), Manager Charles Henderson (Boston main office), and Chief Operator Gurley and Asst. Chiefs Stockwell, Hanford, Manning, and Thomas (Cleveland office). See EA, June 16, Nov. 1 and Nov. 16, 1886; NYTr, July 26, 1883; BG, July 20, 1883; Telegrapher, Oct. 16, 1865; CPD, July 21, 1883.

[12]JT, Feb. 1, 1868 and Apr. 11, 1869; see also July 15, 1870, where again under "How They Rise" a brief item told of the Republican gubernatorial nomination of Vermonter John W. Stewart, who had served as a military telegrapher during the Civil War.

[13]Frank Lewis Dyer and Thomas Commerford Martin, Edison. His Life and Inventions (New York, 1929), Vol. I, passim and p. 60; Harold C. Livesay, Andrew Carnegie and the Rise of Big Business (Boston, 1975), Chapts. II-III; Albert Bigelow Paine, Theodore N. Vail. A Biography (New York, 1929), pp. 14-23, 36-41; Alvin F. Harlow, Old Wires and New Waves (New York, 1936), pp. 421-422; see also EA, June 1 and Nov. 1, 1886.

[14]Dyer and Martin, Edison, Vol. I, pp. 73-74; George E. McNeill, ed., The Labor Movement. The Problem of To-Day (Boston, 1887), p. 390; Phillips, Sketches, p. 64; for senior telegraph managers who saw Civil War service, see Bates, Lincoln, p. 408.

The Golden Age was probably romanticized a good deal. Robert Thompson found a wide variation in income among operators in the early 1850s, as well as 14-hour days and compulsory Sunday and overtime work. See Robert Luther Thompson, Wiring a Continent (Princeton, 1947), pp. 245-246.

[15]Operator, Sept. 15, 1880.

Under chief operators I include one chief repairer and one chief clerk, presumably roughly equivalent in status.

My managerial category includes one "constructor" of a fire alarm telegraph company, whom I take to be a kind of senior technician, again roughly comparable to a manager. The four non-telegraphic managers comprised a depot manager, a train dispatcher, the superintendent of a "manufactory," and a telephone superintendent. Six years later, the Electric Age reported on the Old Timers' Association, still going strong, and noted that its 218 members broke down into 3 lawyers, 14 journalists, 2 in the telephone and electric business, 21 in various commercial pursuits, and the rest, 173, in railroading and telegraphy. There was no indication of how many of the latter were managers. EA, June 16, 1886, and see also, Sept. 1, 1887.

I should state here that using the Old Timers' Association as a gauge of mobility is far from infallible, since those most successful and well-disposed toward the field would be more likely to join than operators who fell into stagnant ruts or left the key in disgust. Having made this qualification, I still believe that the proportions at least suggest a substantial degree of managerial mobility for those who entered the industry in its early, entrepreneurial years.

[16]Telegrapher, Feb. 18, 1871; JT, June 1, 1872 and Jan. 15, 1875.

The 1872 editorial additionally argued that the field, although not itself promising, provided an operator with "a general practical business education" which would suit him for advancement "in almost any positions or business in life." For those dogged enough to aspire to something better within the craft, the Journal intoned: "The first rule for rising is, that a young man shall make common cause with his employer--that he shall entirely identify himself with his interests."

[17]Operator, Nov. 15, 1883 and Jan. 1, 1884; Senate, Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 937. Elsewhere (pp. 938-940) Green claimed that upward mobility did exist for deserving operators.

[18]EA, Dec. 16, 1886, and see also, Jan. 1, 1888.

The '86 article goes on to describe the rate wars of the past three years, and even refers to operators' salaries as "their meagre pittance," at one point implying that any gain to operators has been through their own increased thrift rather than slackened corporate purse strings.

[19]House of Representatives, 51st Congress, 2d Session (1890), House Executive Document 1, Part 4 (Postmaster General's Report), p. 122; Richard T. Ely, "Should

the Government Control the Telegraph?" the Arena, Dec., 1895, p. 51; EA, May 16, 1888; see also Dyer and Martin, Edison, Vol. I, pp. 58-59.

An Electric Age editorial (Mar. 1, 1887) claimed that the position of managers, too, had eroded within the last 10-15 years.

[20]House Executive Document 1, Part 4 (1890), p. 122. Wanamaker cited the Electric World's claim that of the 100 men of 195 Broadway's night force, 36 were "either studying or working on something else during the day. In these occupations are, doctors, 8; lawyers, 6; ministers, 3; brokers, 3; actors, 2; theatrical managers, 2; real estate dealers, 2; inventors, 2; book agent, 1; manufacturer, 1; civil engineer, 1; author, 1; commercial business, 1; electrical special agent, 1; composer of music, 1."

[21]Telegrapher, July 31, 1875; BH, July 23, 1883; Operator, Apr. 1, 1882 and Apr. 4, 1885.

McClelland evidently never actually practiced despite having an M.D.

[22]Telegrapher, Sept. 25, 1875; Operator, Nov. 15, 1883, May 30, 1885; Phillips, Sketches, p. 246; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 227. See also Senate, 48th Congress, 1st Session (1884), Senate Report 577, p. 256.

[23]Telegrapher, Oct. 29, 1870 and June 24, 1871, see also Nov. 2, 1867; EA, Aug. 16 and Oct. 1, 1886. By 1886, a few telegraph lines were granting paid vacations but not the Western Union. The company's Journal of the Telegraph, in an 1872 editorial on vacation policy, has left us a frank and ugly example of the era's business mind in action. It is worth quoting at length:

"Now, all business is selfish and nothing else. The lines are built to make money, and the operator labors for the same end. It may be very sordid, but we live in a very sordid world, and the interest and duty of a company is to make it pay, and yet preserve all those moral obligations due from man to his fellow, which no position or business can ignore. If vacations will secure health and improved capacity of service from operators, it is in the interest of companies to grant every facility for securing the greatest bodily vigor, and will do so, if from no higher motive, from selfishness alone. We have no doubt that the time will come, that with the company's successful arrangement of its capital, its thorough hold on society as an acknowledged permanent integral part of the chief national industrial agencies, these questions of health will form a more conspicuous part of its policy. It has commenced providing for its dead. It will not long forget

the living." JT, May 1, 1872.

[24]Operator, Apr. 15, 1874; see also Telegrapher, Nov. 2, 1867.

"Lefferts" refers to Marshall Lefferts, an early Western Union manager and technical specialist.

The Western Union also docked operators for mistakes made if a customer claimed damages. Telegrapher, Dec. 4, 1875.

[25]JT, Mar. 15, 1873; Operator, Nov. 11, 1882.

A year before, Johnston wrote that long-standing implicit operator expectations of corporate paternalism in return for long and faithful service was now, in the light of the company's treatment of its employees, a "mistake." Operator, May 1, 1881.

[26]Operator, Feb. 15, 1881.

The Chicago correspondent contrasted the large urban office with "the smaller interior" ones "where honors are easy, and where official dignity may, if it chooses, get down off its pedestal and 'swap lies' with the boys." This difference is important, I think, especially with regard to labor organizing and militancy. But a general rationalization and tightening of the system doubtless touched the small offices, too.

[27]JT, Jan. 15, 1870.

"No consideration of kindness or personal popularity," Reid went on, "can be allowed to interfere with the exercise of an authority which, while it should be kind and just, must be absolute and rigorous." He also called telegraphy "generous and paternal" compared to other pursuits.

[28]BG, July 17 and 20, 1883; BH, July 16, 1883; NYT, July 18, 1883.

When the Journal of the Telegraph defended the necessity of Sunday work for operators, it argued that "the telegraph, in its relation to mankind, is simply a machine connecting distant parties," and "that in this machine their [i.e., operators who object to Sunday duty] individuality is lost. Their duties are not the duties of labor, but consist in administering to the wants of others, and than this there is no pursuit more noble." JT, June 16, 1873.

[29]BG, July 20, 1883; TA, Oct. 16, 1885; EA, Apr. 1, 1887; JT, Sept. 15, 1871; Telegrapher, Dec. 26, 1864, Jan. 7, 1871, June 12 and Oct. 9, 1875; Operator, Feb. 1, 1877.

[30]JT, Dec. 15, 1876; Operator, June 13, 1885; see also Telegrapher, Oct. 9, 1875.

There was apparently some bridling by the operator-readers of journals that tried to serve up at least a modest diet of technical fare. When the Operator introduced some technical articles in the mid-70s, "there was much complaint," its editor recalled, "of becoming 'too scientific' and 'too theoretical.'" The Telegrapher's editor made a similar point in 1871. See Telegrapher, Jan. 7, 1871.

[31]Telegrapher, Oct. 9, 1875.

For an example of the versatility of an early operator, see Reid, Telegraph in America (1879 ed.), pp. 433-434, that sketches the career of Charles G. Merriwether, a Western Union superintendent in the 80s who had "filled every post, messenger, office boy, battery keeper, clerk, operator, manager, repairer, foreman and superintendent" in the South.

[32]Quoted in Operator, May 15, 1877; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 894.

[33]EA, Apr. 16, 1887; BG, July 17, 1883; Operator, May 15, 1877; NYTr, July 17, 1883; NYT, July 17, 1883; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 112, 126, 231.

One of the charges against the personnel policy was that seniority went for naught and that, as the New York Times reported from Boston, "new men have often been shown more favors and given better salaries than those who have been with the company a dozen or 15 years." See also TA, July 16, 1883.

[34]During the Civil War, for example, Robert Thompson says that the average operator's wage may have been around $70-$90 per month, paid, of course, in the swollen greenbacks of the time. First-rate operators got more--Thomas Edison was getting $125 at the war's end--but how typical they were is another matter. The $100-and-over levels that disgruntled operators invoked in the later decades were for first-class telegraphers. The men complaining never hid or denied that fact, but their stress on top salaries tended to obscure the average rate which was, of course, much lower and probably more representative. A suggestive piece of evidence on this comes from the Western Union's own Journal of the Telegraph, to which an Ohio operator wrote in 1868 complaining that telegraphers' insurance fund plans that demanded $1-a-month assessments were "unreasonable" for "the great majority of operators" who made only $40-$60 a month. (JT, Oct. 15, 1868). See

also Thompson, Wiring a Continent, p. 388; Dyer and Martin, Edison, Vol. I, pp. 66, 68, 72-73; BH, July 16, 1883; U.S. Senate, Final Report and Testimony Submitted to Congress by the Commission on Industrial Relations, (Washington, D.C., 1916), Vol. X, p. 9493; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 134.

[35] Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 134, 893; Industrial Commission, Vol. X, p. 9493; Operator, Dec. 15, 1875; see also BG, July 12 and 19, 1883.

Before the Great Strike, District Superintendent Walter Humstone called the Brotherhood's 15% pay raise demand "not warranted" because the sliding scale reduction (which he erroneously dated 1877) had only been 5%. It had, but only for operators getting $601-$1,200 a year (ca. $50-$100 a month). For those in the operator elite, the cut was 10% (NYTr, July 17, 1883).

It is instructive to look at the Western Union's financial profile around the time of the cuts. Between 1874 and 1875 the profit rate fell from 5% to 2%, and then climbed back to 5% by mid-1876, about a half year after the Sliding Scale cuts took effect. During the same period, the rate of dividend declarations (on book value) went from less than ½% in 1874 to almost 2½% in 1875, and then nearly doubled by 1876 to around 4½%. Reckoning dividends paid as a percentage of the year's net income, only 5% of it went to stockholders in 1874, but 103%--that is, a bit more than the company actually earned--was paid in 1875; the figure fell to 88% of net income a half year after the Sliding Scale was imposed. See U.S. Department of Commerce, Historical Statistics of the United States (Washington, 1975), Part 2, pp. 787-788.

A harbinger of the Sliding Scale swept through the company's Southern Division in the first half of 1875 (about six months before the nationwide cuts) leaving a trail of layoffs and truncated salaries. The move was nominally the work of the division's general superintendent, although one is tempted to see it as a trial balloon by the corporate leadership, for it produced no revolt that left a record. See Telegrapher, July 24 and Aug. 21, 1875.

[36] Telegrapher, Sept. 3, 1870; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 226; Harrisburg Book; see also NYH, Jan. 6, 1870; BG, July 12 and 16, 1883; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 125, 193; Operator, Oct. 15, 1875.

Speaking for the company, Boston main office Manager Charles Henderson claimed that the reductions in salaries for new men taking over old posts was simply to regulate and balance the payroll to reflect real worth. "When a man left who had been getting $100 a month in a position

in which he was not worth over $50," he told the Globe, "a new man was engaged for the place at a salary not so large as the former operator had been getting, but yet a perfectly fair one." BG, July 12, 1883.

Another aspect of the salary cutting question is the possibility that a homogenization of wage levels--toward the center, that is--was taking place in telegraphy. John Campbell told the senate committee investigating the operators' plight that the Western Union "would take $5 off a high salaried man and give it to a low salaried man," and a Buffalo correspondent to the Operator claimed in 1879 that the local manager told him of a plan to replace higher-salaried positions with lower-paid operators, and divide the difference "among the men in each grade." The same year, another Buffalo operator observed that "Even our chiefs . . . are paid but $5 a month more than the highest grade of operators, and if the pay-roll tells a true tale, they are chiefs in duties and responsibilities only." A perusal of the Harrisburg Book does suggest that nominal salary rates were converging toward the center in the Gilded Age. The spread between the manager and a first-class operator in 1866 was probably around $45; by 1887, it narrowed to $20, although widened to $30 by the mid-90s. But reckoned in constant dollars, the spread did not narrow; indeed, it actually increased. There are problems in analyzing these data since I am matching salaries and skill grades based on educated guess (payrolls did not specify first- or second-class status), and the office was a smallish one (with never more than 15 operators) and so may not have been representative. But by comparing managers and chief operators, who are identified as such, the case seems a bit stronger. The spread between manager and chief in 1866 was $35; in 1871, $20; in 1882, $10; in 1887, $30; and from 1891-1900, $20. But again, in constant dollars, the two salaries, except for one dramatic divergence in 1887, move roughly in parallel over the period. Still the perception of a narrowing must be considered an important possibility. One more thing on homogenization: in the larger economic picture, it represented a common movement toward semi-skilled status in factory work, but there was no comparable deskilling of telegraphy in the period. See Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 112; Operator, July 1 and 15, 1879; Harrisburg Book; Historical Statistics of the United States, Part 1, pp. 200-201; and on the homogenization of labor outside telegraphy in the era, see David M. Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, Segmented Work, Divided Workers (Cambridge, Eng., 1982), Ch. IV.

On salary cuts, see also Operator, May 15, 1875 and June 1, 1883. On temporary salary increases, see Jan.

1 and Oct. 15, 1881.

[37]Operator, Jan. 15, 1880.

[38]Senate Report 577 (1884), p. 194; Operator, Jan. 15, 1881. On mergers and job market constriction, see also Operator, Apr. 1, 1879 and Sept. 1, 1881; Thompson, Wiring a Continent, p. 422; Harlow, Old Wires, p. 413; EA, Sept. 1, 1887.

The apparent exception was the Western Union-B & O Merger of 1887-8. At least through early 1888, there were evidently no mass layoffs of former B & O operators; there was even praise for corporate officials because of this. "The Western Union here," a Baltimore correspondent to the Electric Age wrote, "did well by the employees of the defunct company, and with possibly an exception or two all were provided for." See EA, Dec. 16, 1887, Jan. 16 and Mar. 1, 1888.

Alfred H. Seymour, a former Mutual Union manager, testified in 1883 that "every absorption that has been made by the Western Union Company" resulted in wage cuts for old and newly-absorbed employees of the telegraph giant. Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 228-229.

[39]Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 103; McNeill, Labor Movement, pp. 390-391.

The telegraph "colleges" that sprang up in the Gilded Age promising youthful Americans entry into an appealing (and white-collar) field coincided with this swelling labor pool. How much they actually affected the existing operators' situation with their graduates is open to question; I will discuss it in Chapter V. But in any case the "colleges" were undoubtedly a sign of the telegraph boom and the perception of that boom in the popular mind.

[40]Telegrapher, June 4, 1870 and Feb. 1, 1875; Operator, Feb. 15, 1881; see also Telegrapher, Jan. 9 and May 8, 1875.

[41]Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 117; see also Operator, Oct. 15, 1884; Atlanta Constitution, July 21, 1883 (hereafter cited as AC); NYT, July 15, 1883; NYTr, July 31, 1883.

The unanimous condemnation of promiscuous teaching of telegraphy by all operator spokesmen was another indication of this. See Chapter V below.

[42]"It is very exhausting work," remarked John Campbell. "There are very few old men in the telegraph business. If you go into any of the large offices you will be struck with that fact." Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 116.

On the youth (and largely single status) of operators, see also Dyer and Martin, Edison, Vol. I, p. 59; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 118, 149-150; Operator, Mar. 1, 1874; Irish World, Aug. 4, 1883 (hereafter cited as IW); BH, Aug. 15 and 19, 1883; EA, May 2, 1887; NYT, July 16, 1883; NYTr, July 17 and 18, 1883.

[43]Dyer and Martin, Edison, Vol. I, pp. 73-74; Operator, July 15, 1875; EA, June 16, 1886, Mar. 16 and Apr. 1, 1887; JT, Apr. 1, 1868; BG, July 12, 1183; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 151, 226.

"They were looked upon with wonder as possessing knowledge which separated them from the rest of the crowd," Minnie Swan Mitchell, a young telegrapher active in the 1880s recalled a half-century later. "Passes to theatres and on all railroads, etc., were always available. This made it possible for telegraphers, with youth and the great wide world beckoning, to give ear to the siren song of adventure. Wherever one stopped he (or sometimes she) could find employment, or, barring that, friends." Minnie Swan Mitchell, "Lingo of the Telegraph Operators," American Speech, Apr. 1937, p. 155.

[44]JT, Oct. 15, 1868; Telegrapher, Oct. 15, 1870; EA, Jan. 16, 1887. The 1870 New York City testimony of "Tina" cites the (female) manager's "absolutism" as driving operators away. I will consider this form of worker resistance more fully in Chapter V below. For now, it is sufficient to suggest that it may have been part of the cause of high telegrapher mobility, dovetailing with the increasing dissatisfaction of operators with corporate discipline and impersonality.

[45]EA, June 1, 1886.

[46]EA, Apr. 1, 1887 and Jan. 1, 1888, see also June 1, 1886, and, May 2, 16 and July 1, 1887; Telegrapher, Feb. 4, 1871; Operator, Apr. 1, 1882 and May 15, 1883; NYT, July 14, 1883.

The Western Union's "extra" system--doing part-time work to fill demand--was probably more than a matter of the necessity of the market-place. "About one-quarter of the men employed in this office," District Superintendent F.H. Tubbs told a reporter during the Great Strike, "are on the regular payroll. The remainder are extra men. I

do not know that this is particularly advantageous to the company. It is the condition in which I found things when I came here, and I have never seen any necessity for changing it. The larger offices must of necessity have a large extra force." But the year before, the Operator scored the corporation's management "which, to obviate the inevitable full payment of salaries, and for economy's sake, works short-handed, and when a 'rush' comes calls in men from dry-goods stores, gambling houses, stock-brokers' offices, government offices--anywhere. . . ." Although the Operator's charges were on the hysterical and hyperbolic side, the very large proportion of "extra" operators acknowledged by Tubbs strongly suggests that the company consciously segmented its operating force in big urban offices to avoid higher labor costs.

[47]Harrisburg Book. My method involved sampling operators on the payroll in the month of October of each year and reckoning turnover by changes in personnel from October to October. The year 1880 was missing from the book, as was the page for October 1879; for the latter, I used June instead. (I am undoubtedly cheating many of the operators by not assuming that they were there for the missing year of 1880, but will err on the side of caution for now.) I also considered an operator as staying even if he had previously not been an operator; that is, someone listed in the October 1883 payroll as a messenger and as an operator in the October 1884 roster was considered as a staying operator, since what is important is that he persisted at the office and eventually did wield a key.

On Laverty, see BG, Aug. 16, 1883; NYT, Aug. 16, 1883.

Some records for the Syracuse, New York Western Union office survive as well, but only cover the last decade of the 19th century. The office there had an average operating force three times that of Harrisburg's (33.6 operators) and the turnover rate for 1890-1900 averaged considerably below the Harrisburg one--29.2%, or as 3-year moving averages, 28.3%. But the 1890s were a depression decade, and because of the sparseness of the Syracuse data, I cannot say whether this was more or less typical for the Gilded Age. See Record Book, Syracuse Western Union office, in Box 53, Western Union collection, Division of Electricity and Modern Physics, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter cited as Syracuse Book).

[48]Harrisburg Book. Of the remaining long-term Harrisburg employees, 5 metamorphosed from messenger to operator (and then to clerk in one case), 6 stayed as

operators, one clerk changed to operator, one remained a manager, for his entire tenure there in the period (R.B. Zeigler, chief from 1866 to 1886), and three were promoted to supervisory positions: Horace A. Clute, from operator to manager in 1871 (with no change in his $100 salary); C.A. Bigler, an operator from 1871 to 1881, became manager (at $90) in 1881; and George Catherman, an operator from 1885-6, became night operator in 1887--which was probably equivalent to a chiefship--with no raise in his $60 salary.

There are also fragmentary records from the Syracuse Western Union office, but I hesitate to use them to attempt even the tentative sort of conclusions that I have drawn from the Harrisburg data. A memo at Syracuse, ca. 1911, lists current operators with 10 or more years' Western Union service. There were 18, their tenures ranging from 10 to 48 years. There are no indications of managerial mobility except for the longest exployed, Daniel V. Ferris, who entered the company on May 16, 1863, and was (at least as early as 1890) the office chief, at $85 a month. The average tenure for the group (all but five of whom entered the craft in the 19th century) was 19.9 years. See Syracuse Book; and memo, "Respectfully Returned to Manager Bierhardt," in Box 53, Western Union collection, Division of Electricity and Modern Physics, Smithsonian Institution.

[49]W.J. Johnston, Telegraphic Tales and Telegraphic History (New York, 1880), pp. 58-59; Operator, Dec. 15, 1875; see also Jan. 1 and Apr. 15, 1876.

[50]Dyer and Martin, Edison, Vol. I, p. 127; L.C. Hall, "Telegraph Talk and Talkers," from McClures, 1902, repr. in Phillips, Sketches, pp. 224-225; EA, Mar. 1, 1888, see also Aug. 1, 1887 ("A Lady Operator's Reverie,"), where a fictional young woman telegrapher muses to herself: "I think the operator I work with is the worst I ever heard. I sent him the word 'Catarrh,' the other day, and he actually said 'Min. sneeze.' [i.e., operators' shorthand for "Wait a minute; I have to stop to sneeze"] I suppose he thought I laughed, but I didn't. He tries to be awful funny; always says 'Gm. [Good Morning] dear.' He makes me sick."

[51]Mitchell, "Lingo," p. 155; Johnston, Tales, p. 59; Thayer, Wired Love, passim.

Mitchell may have been speaking from experience. A Brotherhood strike leader among women operators in New York and then Minnie Swan, she appears to have married another union figure, John Mitchell, Master Workman of the Local Assembly in that city.

"Misplaced (Telegraphic) Affections," a tragi-comic poem, described such a blind courtship that had, unlike Thayer's, an unhappy ending when the two operators, to their mutual disappointment and disillusionment, finally meet in person. Johnston, Tales, pp. 59-61.

[52]NYT, July 12, 1883; Telegrapher, Jan. 30, 1865; Operator, Apr. 15, 1876, June 1, 1881 and June 15, 1883.
Ella Cheever, narrating her heroine Nattie's courtship by wire wrote that "she secured quiet chats with 'C,' [her beau] uninterrupted, and without being told in the middle of some pretty speech to 'Shut up!' or to 'Keep out!' by some soured and inelegant operator on the line, to whom the romance of telegraphy had long ago given place to the monotonous, poorly paid, everyday reality." Wired Love, p. 48.

[53]Operator, June 15, 1883; NYT, July 12, 1883.

[54]"Souvenir, The American Telegraphers' Tournament Association, Philadelphia, October 30-31, 1903," (pamphlet), in Box 39, Western Union collection, Division of Electricity and Modern Physics, Smithsonian Institution; for earlier speed contests, see Operator, Oct. 1, 1875, Nov. 1, 1877, and Aug. 15, 1884; Electrical World, May 24, 1890 and Apr. 1, 1893.
The later contests were more elaborate and quasi-official.

[55]NYT, July 22, 1883; TA, June 16, 1883.
The Times piece pointed out that non-striking Brotherhood rail operators could indirectly aid their striking fellows by "rushing" or sending deliberately garbled messages to the Western Union scab replacements.
Another operators' term, "roast," described an intense session of work at the key or sounder.

[56]Telegrapher, Dec. 26, 1864; Operator, May 15, 1876; see also Telegrapher, Jan. 21, 1871, "The Operator's Lament," for similar contempt for women operators.

[57]Dyer and Martin, Edison, Vol. I, pp. 99-100; EA, Sept. 16, 1887; Operator, Jan. 1, 1879 and Sept. 15, 1883.
Thomas Edison was the butt of one of these hazings at Boston in 1868; but unlike most "freshmen," Edison, by his own later account, did not break.

[58]Hall, "Telegraph Talk," in Phillips, Sketches,

p. 224; Operator, June 15, 1879; EA, Oct. 15, 1887.

[59]EA, Feb. 1, Apr. 1, Apr. 16 and May 2, 1887; Telegrapher, May 8, 1875.

Likewise, an operator's marriage announcement said that he "was duplexed." Operator, June 1, 1875.

In 1871, a Vermont entrepreneur advertised telegraph operators' badge pins, in the shape of a miniature key, for telegraphers to wear as a sign of craft membership and pride; his line included a "very small, neat" version for women. JT, Mar. 15, 1871.

On telegraphers' terms, see Mitchell, "Lingo," pp. 154-155; and Hervey Brackbill, "Some Telegraphers' Terms," American Speech, Apr. 1929.

[60]E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (New York, 1964), pp. 9-11, is a brilliant and seminal exposition of the dynamics of class and culture.

[61]In some cases, as noted above in discussing alternate careers that frustrated telegraphers pursued, operators did in fact move into "real" middle-class positions such as medicine, law, dentistry, and the like. There may have been considerable overlap and fluidity between some marginal white-collar jobs and more traditional middle-class ones, although the latter may themselves have been on the fringes of the "real" middle class: dentistry, for example; one of the less-reputable medical branches such as allopathy or homeopathy (rather than, say, surgery); or a pulpit in a plebeian or evangelical church rather than in more prestigious Episcopalian or Presbyterian ones.

As to the operators' dress, please note that I qualify my description with the phrase "on the surface" since there were probably subtle but important details that distinguished a contemporary operator from a banker or a prosperous lawyer.

During the strike, the Boston Herald, in describing young Frank Phillips, who had blown the whistle beginning the strike at 195 Broadway, noted that he "might easily be mistaken for a well-fed doctor of divinity." (BH, July 23, 1883).

[62]Telegrapher, Jan. 30, 1865, see also Sept. 26, 1864, where the first president of the National Telegraphic Union declared, "A Telegrapher to-day is not regarded in the same light that he was a year ago. The better class of operators throughout the country are joining our ranks."

[63]Telegrapher, Jan. 30, 1865, July 24, 1875; JT, Apr. 1, 1869 and Jan. 15, 1872.

In an anti-smoking editorial, Journal of the Telegraph editor James Reid prescribed that his company's employees "should meet the public with more of that decorum which banking houses exhibit than even these present."

[64]JT, Aug. 2 and Sept. 1, 1869; on drinking and tramps, see Operator, Jan. 15 and Dec. 15, 1876; EA, June 16, 1883, Aug. 16, 1886, Feb. 1 and Apr. 1, 1888; Phillips, Sketches, pp. 39-46, 61-72, 139-149; NYT, July 20, 1883; CPD, Aug. 7, 1883.

The Electric Age commended the reorganized Brotherhood in 1886 for including a temperance clause in its "platform" and went on to recall with satisfaction that during the Great Strike "the unadulterated orthodox 'Bum,' the heavy weight lend-me-a-dime 'Lusher' was conspicuously absent from the ranks of the strikers." See also IW, Aug. 4, 1883.

[65]Operator, Mar. 1, 1880; Paine, Vail, p. 22.

"From the diary," writes Vail's hagiographer, "we get the notion that young Vail and his companions were generally eating oysters, playing billiards, or going to the theater, and that they were always behind in their salary account." Ibid., p. 19.

[66]Operator, Aug. 1, 1874, June 1, 1875.

This was the complete expense list:

"Board $8 a week	$416
Washing $3 per week	36
Shaving three times per week	23.40
Hair Cutting once per month	4.20
Shampooing once per week	18.20
Clothing, two suits	100.00
Overcoat, say	40
Underclothing, collars, handkerchiefs, etc.	50
Boots and Shoes	25
Hats	15
Three drinks per day	168.80
Three segars per day	91.00
Boots blacked	18.00
Morning paper	18.20
Car fare	13.00
Theatre twice per week	104.00
Chewing tobacco, 50 cents per week	26.00
	$1,161.80

> To say nothing of extra meals, buying fruit, medicines, and taking ladies to the theatre occasionally."

In addition to youth and mobility, the high-tension nature of telegraphy was probably also an important cause of operator alcoholism. "Subjected to nervous tension for hours together at the key," Edison's official biographers wrote, "many of them unfortunately took to drink. . . ." (Dyer and Martin, Edison, Vol. I, p. 61.) The "burn-out" rate of telegraphers, both physically and emotionally, was probably high.

[67]Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 820; Operator, June 1, 1879, on operator intemperence, profligacy, and immaturity, see also May 15, 1876, Mar. 15, 1879; JT, Feb. 1 and July 15, 1868.

[68]TA, July 16, 1883; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 117, 149-150, 231; see also BG, July 17, 1883.

[69]BG, July 17, 1883; Proceedings of the Executive Board D.A. No. 45 Brotherhood of Telegraphers of the United States and Canada (Pittsburgh, 1882), p. 10; NYT, July 15, 1883.

[70]EA, Nov. 16, 1886; NYTr, July 16, 1886; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 116-117, 220; BG, July 20, 1883; see also Operator, June 16, 1883.

O'Connor compared the operators, "of necessity an educated class," to the printers, evidently not invidiously. The printers, of course, were labor aristocrats. For similarly favorable (and invidious) middle-class editorial views of the operators, see NYT, July 21, 1883; and Harper's Weekly, Aug. 18, 1883.

Whatever the perceptions, the dichotomy between "hand" and "brain" work is spurious. See especially Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital (New York, 1974), Chapt. I, and passim.

[71]Chicago Tribune, July 29, 1883, quoted in NYTr, July 31, 1883; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 117; North Carolina Bureau of Labor Statistics, Eighth Annual Report (Raleigh, 1894), p. 274; Phillips, Sketches, p. 95.

[72]Andrew Carnegie, Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie (Boston, 1920), pp. 37-38.

[73]Operator, June 15, 1883; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 117, 149-150; Phillips, Sketches, p. xv.

Alfred Seymour placed operators in the same category as salesmen and clerks in wholesale mercantile houses, but said that the latter were better paid; he claimed that a friend clerking in a large importing firm got $125 a month. Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 231.

[74]Ibid.; see also BH, Aug. 15, 1883; and "The Rules of '197,'" in Operator, May 15, 1876, that include this stanza:

> When you have been off on a ten days' tair,
> And find you haven't a red to spair,
> But must replenish your portemonnaire,
> Don't come to work with dishevelled hair,
> But "pull down your vest" with thoughtful cair,
> "Wipe off your chin," adjust your collair,
> Submit your boots to a good shinair,
> And dress in your best like a ministaire.
> Brace up, brother, brace with care,
> And show off the style of an operataire.

[75]N.d., quoted in JSP, Apr. 6, 1884.

[76]Boston Evening Transcript, Aug. 20, 1883 (hereafter cited as BET); Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 937.

[77]Telegrapher, Feb. 4, 1871; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 150, 177-178, 230; TA, June 1, 1883; see also JSP, Apr. 6 and Aug. 24, 1884; Operator, Aug. 15, 1874, July 15, 1879.

The 1871 Telegrapher piece claimed, "without overstating the facts, that at least three-fifths of the telegraphs employes in New York City are living in advance of their monthly stipends."

An operator could also provide himself (and family) with a modest economic cushion through three quasi-official Western Union organizations: The Telegraphers' Mutual Benefit Association paid death benefits; the Serial Building Association was a savings and loan institution to finance house purchases; and a Telegraphers' Aid Society dispensed limited sick payments. The benefit plans required assessments on the operators, of course. See EA, Feb. 1, 1887; Operator, Aug. 15, 1874; Reid, Telegraph in America (1886 ed.), p. 740.

[78]The latter phrase was from a Chicago operator on the eve of the Great Strike. NYT, July 18, 1883.

A Cincinnati correspondent to the Operator in 1880 wrote that with an average $80 a month salary, and room, board, and washing costing $25 a month, "the employes of this office are highly favored in comparison with their

confreres elsewhere." Operator, Jan. 1, 1880. John Campbell said that single Pittsburgh operators paid an average of $7 a week board and had "to work very long hours" to accumulate a small savings. Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 118. On operator frugality, see also EA, Mar. 1, 1887.

[79]Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 120,236.

Harry Orr, who detailed his expenses for himself, his wife, and two children, said he raised his $75 first-class salary to $85-$90 by moonlighting with the Associated Press. He had previously rented a house closer to his office, but its high rent--$47.50 a month--led him to move to a suburb and a house renting at $25 a month. Additionally, he spent $5 in carfare and $40 for food per month, leaving a surplus (with the extra work) of $15-$20; without the moonlighting, it would only have been $5. Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 177-178.

[80]Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 765-766, see also p. 132; and NYTr, July 17, 1883, on linemen's salaries.

[81]Any thorough and systematic record of operators' salaries in the Gilded Age is probably impossible, and always bedeviled by the problems involved in averaging, skill, sex, and location differences, and the lack of a standard Western Union salary grading system. My profile of operator salaries for the period, inadequate as it is, is drawn from the following: Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 103, 118, 134, 151, 177-178, 908, 965; Telegrapher, Mar. 18 and Aug. 5, 1871; Senate, 43rd Congress, 1st Session, Senate Report 242 (1874), p. 50; Senate Report 577 (1884), pp. 257-258; Thompson, Wiring a Continent, p. 338; Harlow, Old Wires, p. 419; BH, July 16, 1883; NYTr, July 16 and 17, 1883; Dyer and Martin, Edison, Vol. I, pp. 66, 68, 72-73; Frank Parsons, "The Telegraph Monopoly," Pt. IV, the Arena, Apr. 1896, pp. 805, 807-808; EA, May 2 and 16, Oct. 15 and Nov. 16, 1887; Apr. 16 and May 1, 1888; Operator, Mar. 1, 1874, May 15, 1877, July 15 and Dec. 1, 1879 and Jan. 1, 1880; Syracuse Book. For ca. 1915 wage rates, see Senate, Industrial Relations (1916), Vol. X, pp. 9303-9304, 9307.

[82]Table based on figures given in Industrial Relations, Vol. X, p. 9493; constant dollars computed from Historical Statistics of the United States, Pt. 1, pp. 200-201.

[83]Harrisburg Book; Historical Statistics, Pt. 1, p. 200-201.

Even an apparently stagnant salary would have been growing in purchasing power over much of the period. A $50-a-month paycheck in 1876 became 34% more valuable in 1886 although the nominal figures remained the same. Deflation was marked in the 1870s, slowed in the early 80s, and then continued from 1884, with some variation, until the mid-90s.

Harry Orr said that in 1873, as a single man, he made $90; in 1883, with a family, he earned $75, increased to $85-$90 by moonlighting. In constant dollars, his 1873 pay was $71.42, the 1883 figure, $74.25 (or, with the extra, $84.15-$89.10). Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 177-178.

[84]From 1875 to 1897, the secular trend for operators' average daily wage rates, with some fluctuation, was upward. I base my conclusion on data collected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor in 1900, culled from various state bureau of labor statistics reports. My averages are taken from reports in the tables which contain at least 100 operators; where more than one state report was cited for a year, I averaged the averages. The final figures were then rendered into constant dollars. See U.S. Commissioner of Labor, Fifteenth Annual Report (Washington, 1900), Vol. II, pp. 1478-1480; Historical Statistics, Pt. 1, pp. 200-201. On steady work patterns of telegraphy, see Operator, May 15, 1877; and Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 155-156.

[85]Brotherhood spokesmen and others frequently compared telegraphers' salaries (both average and top) with what seem unusually high figures for skilled workers; they probably represented real but atypical sums. An 1882 Brotherhood recruiting circular, for example, gave the following daily wage rates (cited to impress readers with the power of union organization to raise income) which I have converted into monthly wages (based on a 26-day work month) shown in parentheses:

Printers	$3-$5 ($78-$130)
Carpenters	$3.50-$4 ($91-$104)
Painters	$3-$5 ($78-$130)
Bricklayers	$4 ($104)
Iron Molders	$4-$6 ($104-$156)
Cotton Screwmen	$6 ($156)
Puddlers	$6-$9 ($156-$234)
Glassmakers	$6-$10 ($156-$260)

But a table of average monthly wages for three cities submitted (evidently by the Western Union) to the Senate Committee on Education and Labor, extracted from the 1880

census, shows considerably lower skilled wage levels. The tables in the 1893 Senate Aldrich Report on wage rates over the postbellum years also suggest that the Brotherhood figures are high. In two comparable categories, the Aldrich figures for July 1883 for carpenters averaged $61.62, and for molders, $67.60. See Proceedings of the Executive Board, 10; NYT, July 21, 1883; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 966; Senate, 52d Congress, 2n Session, (1893), Senate Report 1394, "Wholesale Prices, Wages, and Transportation," Part 4, pp. 1277-1360 passim; on the reliability of the Aldrich figures, and a discussion of wages and prices in the period generally, see Stanley Lebergott, Manpower in Economic Growth (New York, 1964), pp. 290-295, and Ch. 6 passim.

[86]Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 231, Senate Report 1394 (1893), Pt. 4, pp. 1573-1581 passim.

Another estimate for urban male teachers, in 1880, gave $31 a week ($12 for women); reckoning a four-week month, the total would be $124, well above the $70-$80 of a first-class operator, even allowing for the two extra months that an operator would work. See David B. Tyack, The One Best System (Cambridge, 1974), p. 62.

Whether gauging telegraphers' or teachers' salaries, the location--urban or rural--plays an important part in determining living standards. "To our country friends," the Operator noted in presenting its list of a single telegrapher's annual expenses in 1875, "these items may appear exaggerated, but to those who know, it will be seen that all are as close to the truth as possible, and with a decided leaning on the safe side." Operator, June 1, 1875.

[87]NYT, July 25, 1883; Operator, Oct. 15, 1883.

[88]Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 1084; another Western Union voice, that of James Reid, used the phrase "clean and genteel handiwork" in describing the craft. Reid, Telegraph in America (1886 ed.), p. 696; see also the Nation, July 19, 1883, whose editorial, perhaps ironically, refers to a "rush of young men into telegraphing, as a clean, genteel calling. . . ."

[89]Something as commonplace and trivial as the way one ate lunch at work seems to reflect the ambiguity of petty white-collar employees such as the telegraphers. A firm advertised a "Ventilated Lunch Satchel" in the Dec. 15, 1883 issue of the Operator--an advertisement, once again, that its creators ran in expectation of selling their wares. The ad referred to the lunch box as the kind

used by "working men and working women, bookkeepers, clerks, engineers, conductors, drivers, school teachers, dressmakers, seamstresses, excursionists, and all persons whose business requires their absence from home during the dinner-hour." The group mentioned is a diverse one, to be sure, but one that does exclude the more traditionally middle-class occupations in business and the professions.

For a notion of respectability and self-education stemming from purely working-class needs and visions among Scottish urban artisans, see Robert Q. Gray, The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh (Oxford, 1976), p. 130.

On the matter of class and cultural overlap, Leon Fink, in his study of the Knights of Labor, notes that many labor activists shared (rather than simply aped) values such as honest labor, wholesome leisure, education and self-education, and domestic idealization with the American middle classes. Much of this had to do with the traditional notion of artisans being part of a great middling stratum. See Leon Fink, Workingmen's Democracy (Urbana, 1983), pp. 12-13.

On the other hand, a number of historians have briefly noted the pretentiousness and exclusionary cultural boundaries of marginal middle-class folk such as 19th-century British clerks. Gareth Stedman Jones writes of this growing white-collar work force: "This latter group was overwhelmingly recruited from the skilled working class, tended to earn comparable wages, and generally inhabited the same districts. Far from recognizing these affinities, however, clerks ostentatiously rejected them. They drew salaries, not wages; their occupations were genteel; their clothes and their hands were clean; their mode of life was modelled upon that of the professional middle class." Eric Hobsbawm called them "a new, and politically conservative labour aristocracy," and David Lockwood explains the origins of their overweaning concern with etiquette as rooted in the clerk's lack of economic independence (as opposed to an artisan or aristocrat) that encouraged "obsequiousness, circumlocution and pretentiousness. . . . His distinguishing mark was [unlike a skill or inherited position] respectability."

All of these observations are perceptive. I think, in the telegraphers' case, that the cultural insecurity and haughtiness that Jones found in British clerks was less decided (cf. the terminology that operators at times used--"Wages," "skilled labor," "craft," "workingmen," etc.) although certainly present. And it would, as we will see, cost them during the Great Strike. The pathological concern with gentility that Lockwood notes in his clerks is also less likely to apply to the telegraphers,

in so far as origins, since the operators did have, beyond general clerical abilities, a formal skill. See Gareth Stedman Jones, "Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870-1900," Journal of Social History, Summer 1974, p. 507; E.J. Hobsbawm, Labouring Men (New York, 1964), p. 273; David Lockwood, The Black-coated Worker (London, 1958), p. 32.

[90]Fink, Workingmen's Democracy, p. 94; Operator, Sept. 1, 1874.

[91]EA, Jan. 1, 16, Feb. 1, Mar. 1 and May 1, 1888.

[92]JT, July 15, 1868; Telegrapher, Sept. 11, 1875; on operator sports, see also Operator, Mar. 1, 1881 and Oct. 21, 1882.

There was an annual spring athletic meet for New York's Western Union employees, including operators, linemen, and messengers. It was probably officially sponsored or at least quasi-official.

[93]Operator, Nov. 15, 1874; TA, June 1, 1883; see also EA, Feb. 1 and Oct. 15, 1887, Mar. 1, Apr. 1 and Apr. 16, 1888; JT, Nov. 1, 1873; Operator, May 1 and Aug. 1, 1874, Feb. 15, 1875, Feb. 1, Apr. 1 and July 15, 1876, May 15 and Sept. 1, 1877, Mar. 1, 1880 and Dec. 1, 1881.

During the 1883 walkout, strikers on a steamboat excursion were entertained by a Western Union Glee Club and "other musical efforts on the part of operators." NYTr, July 23, 1883.

C H A P T E R I V

Dear Brothers and Sisters

Four of the young women operators in the Western Union's main New York office, so the Boston Globe tells us, "unable to withstand the excitement," collapsed in a faint as the Great Strike of 1883 began. It must indeed have been an exciting moment. The huge operating room, its 444 telegraphers ensconced in their glass-partitioned cubicles, had only shortly before been filled with the clattering banality of noontime message traffic. Then, a startling intruder--the "prolonged screech from a small pocket whistle"--abruptly cut off the usual sounds and motions. An operator named Frank Phillips had mounted a table in the center of the room and blown the signal, producing a momentary, breathless hush, and then, a catharsis: cheering, clapping, handkerchief waving, and for four hapless participants, swooning as well.[1]

Conventional Victorians reading of the incident were no doubt reassured. Under the stress of a labor dispute--men's business, after all--members of the Gentler Sex had met their cultural obligations, succumbing in due form. In retrospect, the passing out seems less a product of feminine weakness than of the mid-July air of the seventh-floor operating room and the

ugly, constricting dress in which propriety clad the victims. Yet the "lady operators" of 1883 were not passive victims of either their employers or the social order into which they were born. If they were bound, symbolically through their garb, to stultifying notions of a woman's place and purpose, they possessed other, potentially liberating ties: to each other as working women, to the men in neighboring cubby-holes as shopmates, and to a growing body of dependent employees throughout the nation as members of a heterogeneous class in the making. None of the ties was neat or complete. The "girls" at the keys were neither sweet-faced automatons nor budding radicals. Tension between cultural ideal and expectation on the one hand, and the realities of capitalist expansion in the Gilded Age on the other, must have engendered much ambivalence and perplexity for a restless, adolescent America, and even more poignantly so for such of its daughters as the striking telegraphers of 1883.

The women operators' participation in the Great Strike was significant well out of proportion to their numbers. Although the walkout had left the telegraphers' union broken and its corporate adversary as powerful and arrogant as ever, something quite inspiring had come out of the morass of July and August 1883: The women who struck had shown remarkable loyalty and determination, an integrity acknowledged by friend and foe alike. Why

had they done so? Who were these "girls" who spent 54 hours or more a week bent over keys and sounders?

In the 19th century, most American telegraph operators were men, although the proportion of women grew moderately throughout the postbellum years. During the industry's raucous first decade and a half, a female telegrapher was rare. Emma A. Hunter ably managed a wire near Philadelphia in the early 1850s, while up at Dover, New Hampshire, "an unusually quick and intelligent girl of 14" named Ellen Laughton ran an office at about the same time with equal success. Such women were exceptional. But by the Civil War, crinoline and copper wire no longer made for an odd combination. "You know," one woman wrote the editor of a telegraphers' journal in 1864, "that we--that is, your sister operators--are rapidly growing in numbers," but he probably needed little reminding. About four years before, an official of a New York-Boston line had told Virginia Penny that his firm employed some 50 women, "only at small offices," and another man familiar with the business predicted to the same investigator that "a corps of operators and writers, composed exclusively of females," would eventually be commonplace in the industry. So it would, but

not for nearly a hundred years. Still, the number of females at the key continued to rise in the Gilded Age. By century's end, lady operators were a virtual fixture of the commercial world. Reformer Frances Willard found the sight of "a young woman presiding over the telegraph in offices and railway stations" so ordinary in 1897 "that one has ceased to have even a feeling of surprise at seeing them there."[2]

Willard's description of the typical operator as young was true to life. Like her male counterpart, the female telegrapher was usually in her late teens or early 20s. Among a sample of 102 women operators living in New York City in 1880, culled from that year's federal census, the average age was 21.8 years. Native birth was typical, too. Ninety-two percent of those New Yorkers had been born in the United States. Gilded Age lady operators were also likely to be unmarried--much more so, in fact, than the men. All but four of the women in that same 1880 group declared themselves single.[3]

Exactly how many women were in the craft is harder to know because of the statistical caprices of the Census Bureau and the Western Union. Not until 1900 were telegraphers tabulated separately. Before then, statisticians obscured their actual numbers by counting them jumbled together with other telegraphic employees, or, as in 1890, together with telephone operators. Since most of these

other employees were men--managers, linemen, technicians, clerks, and messengers--the figures understated the proportion of women, except in 1890, when the inclusion of the already heavily female telephone operators had the opposite effect on the outcome. Nevertheless, taken at a suitable discount, the figures do give a rough picture of the small, but growing, percentage of women telegraphers:

YEAR	SOURCE	CATEGORY	NUMBER (% OF TOTAL)
1870	Census	Non-clerical telegraph employees	355 (4%)
1877	Western Union	Employees	750 (8%)
1880	Census	Officials and Employees	1,131 (5%)
1886	Western Union	Employees	1,402 (7%)
1890	Census	Telegraph and telephone ops.	8,474 (16%)
1900	Census	Telegraph ops.	7,229 (12%)

The 1890 figures are the most dubious, the 1900 figures the most reliable, but the overall trend is clear: the absolute number of women operators in the Gilded Age had gone up about twentyfold, and their share of the profession had increased three times.[4]

Many of these "girls," perhaps even the bulk of them, worked in smaller telegraph facilities: isolated railroad junctions or one-woman branch offices in hotels and other public places. When Jennie Mixsell gave up

managing the Western Union's Princeton, New Jersey office upon her marriage in 1868, the company simply had her sister Minnie fill the job. Eighteen-year-old Lizzie Clapp of Readville, Massachusetts, who sent and received at the local Boston & Providence Railroad depot in 1876, would probably have continued to do so had lightning not struck and killed her as she sat on a station window sill during a July thunderstorm. But routine, rather than tragedy, was the lot of most women in such settings. Around the time of the Great Strike, Sue Van Buskirk took care of the Western Union's business at Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, and three years later, equally typically, Miss N.E. Darcy ran the company's branch office amid the very different surroundings of New York's Occidental Hotel. Women branch operators were sometimes quite a bargain for their employers. Norvin Green testified in 1883 that "a few girls at some branch offices in small hotels" cost the Western Union only $15 a month, since the hotels agreed to provide the operators with room and board. Nellie Welch, who had "full charge" of the Point Arena, California telegraph office in 1886, was unusual in her precocity--she was 11--but not in her profession.[5]

Traffic in the smaller offices was generally lighter than in the big urban ones, and so the skill demanded of women branch operators modest. Much of the work was "commercial," which, despite the name, actually meant the

kind of brief, personal dispatches that individuals, rather than businesses, sent. Carrie R. Wetmore's mawkish "A Message":

> Only a pale-faced woman
> Stood at my office desk,
> With eyes filled full to flowing,
> Pleading for this bequest:
>
> If I would send a message,
> A message far away,
> To a son who now was dying--
> But the service she could not pay.

faithfully reflected her workplace milieu, if not her actual experiences. An easier pace in the branch and depot offices hardly made them sinecures. The telegraphic drudges of the 1871 verses of "The Operator's Lament" were two women who "With fingers cold and stiff/With eyelids heavy and red," "sat in their office alone/ Working for their bread." Ten or more hours at the key was probably common. Even the Western Union's house organ obliquely confessed that its branch operators were hard worked when in 1871 it published the ironically-titled "Far Niente," which began:

> Pretty and pale and tired,
> She sits in her stiff backed chair
> While the blazing summer sun
> Shines on her soft brown hair. . . .
>
> It seems such an endless round,
> New York and Boston, and "A,"
> Asserting their sharp, quick sounds,
> Throughout the livelong day. . . .
>
> Have patience--the daylight dies--
> You may close your office at eight;

Have patience, tired brown eyes. . . .

This legion of the pretty, pale, and tired also served as a pool of talent from which the large urban offices could draw recruits for their growing City (or Ladies') Departments. "Quite a number of places in branch offices are being filled by women," a correspondent from 195 Broadway told the Electric Age in 1887, "and several late branch office managers are on the day force here."[6]

Such promotions were relative, though, since women's work in the metropolitan offices usually meant the "light" or "way" wires over which an operator both sent and received slower traffic. The more remunerative and intensive "heavy" circuits (usually press report or market quotations) involved long stretches of sending or receiving only, and were largely the province of men.[7] Surveying employment opportunities for women in 1883, Martha Rayne found the pace of daily work rhythms in the Ladies' Department of Western Union headquarters moderate, and the atmosphere almost homey. She described operators not actually working a wire as "knitting, crocheting, or sewing, passing pleasantly the interval until the arrival of the next message." The company banned reading while on duty, Rayne continued, "but conversation in a low tone is encouraged." Perhaps such a routine did occur in large offices at times, although Rayne's vignette was as idealized as it was idyllic.[8]

Others described the urban operating room less appealingly. In 1883, one "nervous little brunette" on strike told a Boston reporter about a life at the key so taxing as to have forced her to take an extended vacation the previous year in order to keep her sanity. "I used to hear the tick of the instrument all the time and could not sleep," she declared. "I think I was going crazy. I used to jump up out of bed and read the messages that I thought were coming all the time." Nor were complaints of high pressure confined to strikers. An operator who thought telegraphy "a nice occupation" nevertheless told the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1875 that "[o]ur girls all come to us looking bright, fresh and ruddy; but it is not long before they lose color, and strength seems to go with it." "From 8 A.M. to 6 P.M., with only an hour for dinner, makes too long a day for the kind of work," confessed the female manager of a Ladies' Department the same year. "I am sorry to say that some of our girls eat their lunch in the room, not going out at all."[9]

If they had gone out, they would have done so through separate women's exits, for physical segregation of the sexes was as common in metropolitan offices as the division of work between "heavy" male and "light" female wires. Women had their own operating room, as at Chicago in 1869, or sat at their keys primly shielded from roving

eyes behind an 8-foot-high "light partition," as at 195 Broadway in 1875.[10] But despite the combined obstacles of company regulations and mid-Victorian folkways, mixing inevitably occurred. An anonymous St. Louis operator, chafing under the restrictions of the gender bar in the local Western Union office in 1883, pouted:[11]

> Chief Operator Topliff says: "Smirking and smiling of lady operators at the gentlemen must cease, and all conversation between the sexes must only be on business." Thus our dearest privileges are ruthlessly denied us. The Crimes act and the suspension of habeus corpus will probably follow next.

Topliff was a man, but the "girls" in large offices often worked under the watchful eyes and ears of women managers. Much of this had to do with the growing number of operators within the City Departments. In 1869, Chief Fannie Wheeler at the new Chicago Western Union office had only 6 young women to monitor, but by 1875, in the New York headquarters, Chief Frances Letitia Dailey supervised between 59 and 75 operators. By 1883, about 120 of the cubicles there contained women, accounting for over one-quarter of the force. In fact, the proportion of female operators in a large urban office was much higher than their presence within the craft as a whole.[12] Propriety also dictated that such large aggregations of young women be subject to a peculiarly feminine manifestation of workplace discipline. Sometimes discipline outweighed femininity. Lizzie H. Snow, the Western Union's

premier female manager through the mid-70s, was something of a tyrant. "Tina," one of her charges, complained in 1870 of her "absolutism," insults, and peremptory firings "for the most trifling infringements of her ridiculous rules." Snow evidently did a bit of infringing herself, since the Telegrapher reported her dismissal in 1875 "for her refusal to submit to and obey certain rules and regulations of the office, which applied to her as well as to the other chief operators." Her successor, Frances Dailey, was more adept at combining corporate discipline and ladylike deportment. She employed "sedulous courtesy" in dealing with her force, one observer wrote in 1883, and demanded that they do the same among themselves. Except for intimates, the obligatory form of address in the Ladies' Department was to begin with "Miss."[13]

Dailey was part of the female telegraphic elite. In a calling whose opportunities for mobility were fading, the prestige and economic rewards of a managership were even more elusive for women than men. A woman might aspire to a handful of other desirable berths too, most notably as press or broker operators, but few got that far.[14] All of them, though, like the men, began in one of three ways. Country-born Nattie Rogers, of the novel Wired Love, learned her Morse at the village railway depot just the way that her real-life counterparts did. Others enrolled in business schools, the (sometimes fraudulent)

"telegraph colleges," or the Western Union-sponsored course at New York's Cooper Union Institute. The daughters of urban working men usually followed a third route to the key by working as check-girls and simultaneously apprenticing themselves to the craft. They carved learning time out of their workdays by alternately taking on each other's messenger duties during practice sessions. May Willetts, Annie Boyle, Mamie Gilman, Susie McKenna, and Rosie Uth were the proud spring graduates of 1885 at Western Union headquarters, having passed a competitive wire test and won regular desks in the City Department, leaving their days as check-girls behind them.[15]

After proper apprenticeship of four or five years, a young woman might possess the skills of a first-class operator. Certainly the very best among the craft included females. Quadruplex circuits were normally "heavy" male work, but women sat at "quads" too. Miss M. Mason tended Cincinnati's Pittsburgh quad in 1886, while an office mate, Miss Scofield, had "her hands full" on the Indianapolis quad. At the time of the Great Strike, four women in the main Western Union office worked the quad to Syracuse.[16] Josie Reiners, who had "one of the heaviest circuits" at 195 Broadway, was equally capable of assuming the demanding work in a broker's office. So was Minnie Swan, who would emerge as the most prominent woman member of the Brotherhood of Telegraphers. Clara Morley, who hailed from

Bloomington, Illinois, had a reputation as the "champion market-report operator of the West." Highly skilled too was Beda Louise Arnold--daughter of a woman operator--who handled the United Press wire at Bridgeport, Connecticut in 1885. The following year, in the same city's Western Union office, one female and two male telegraphers worked under a chief operator named Miss Larkin.[17]

Such refined Morse skills could see a woman through many years in the craft. Kansas-born Christina Barnum, a 38-year-old widow working a wire in New York in 1880, was still so employed seven years later, sharing the New York Herald's ship news reporting station on Long Island with a male colleague.[18] At age 20, Laura Moore sat in the City Department at 195 Broadway; twelve years later, in 1887, her profession had not changed although her employer--she now worked for the B & O--had. Some of Moore's shopmates of the mid-70s also stayed in the field: By 1884, after 9 years, Emma Charlier, Anne McShea, C. Breier, and A. Frazee were all first-class operators, and still at Western Union headquarters. Josie Reiners's enviable skill and reputation in 1886 rested on six or more years spent with keys and sounders. Miss Sinisbaugh, who rose to be City Traffic Chief of the huge Broadway complex in 1887, had been telegraphing at least twice as long. The Western Union's top lady manager in 1886, Frances Dailey, was a veteran of 18 years' service.[19]

But few women were career telegraphers. The large proportion of them in their late teens and early 20s meant that most left the craft at about the time that they would have begun mastering it. In this respect, they were like other contemporary "working girls" who passed those same years as breadwinners, with the frequent expectation that marriage would shortly follow. And so Kate Donovan was triply unrepresentative of her sister operators in postbellum America: a 30-year-old "manageress" in 1880, she was still a manager six years later--and still "Miss."[20] Even in an occupation already notorious for high turnover, the short tenure of women was axiomatic, and the Western Union shaped its policy accordingly. "These ladies," Journal of the Telegraph editor James D. Reid explained in 1870, "in the ordinary course of nature, must in time become the lights and managers of homes." That made it unlikely that they would become the managers of large offices. "Very few of them expect to make it the occupation of a life time," declared Norvin Green in 1883. "They are generally looking forward to a time when they can lay it aside, so they do not apply themselves as the men do." Chief Operator Gurley of the Cleveland Western Union said much the same thing. Women operators lacked the kind of familiarity with the world of business and its terminology that made a first-rate operator, and they did not bother to remedy their ignorance. But then again,

why should they? "With most of them," said Gurley, "it is only something to support themselves until they marry." Unlike many European government telegraph services, the Western Union did not force its women to quit upon marriage. It simply expected that most would do so on their own.[21]

Most did, even when talented and promising operators. Miss M. Mason, a quad woman at Cincinnati, was surely a polished telegrapher, but when she became Mrs. Beckett in 1886, she abandoned her craft. "Mrs. B. will continue to work here for a short time," one of her colleagues informed the Electric Age, "until she and hubby are ready to go housekeeping." Whatever economic advantage a two-breadwinner household might have had for the Becketts was far less pressing than the weight of culture and convention. Respectable middle-class (and working-class) wives did not enter the labor market. Likewise, the expectation that most young working women would--indeed, should--soon marry also guided the choices about a career that telegraph "girls" made. So, while telegraphy was even more barren a field for women than men, the explanations of Norvin Green and others that spoke of female operators' half-hearted commitment to the wires and whole-hearted commitment to matrimony had some truth in them.[22]

The whole truth, however, was more complex and less flattering to Green and his associates. The low salaries

and meager opportunities accorded most women telegraphers had as much to do with their performance at the key as did daydreaming about trousseaux and hearthside contentment. Dead-end berths and thin pay envelopes were both cause and result of the high turnover of the Western Union's "girls." A structural bias that typed certain positions as "women's work"--and by definition less skilled, less well paid, and less likely to lead anywhere--was not confined to telegraphy. The various clerical jobs opening up to more and more young women in the same period also obeyed economic and cultural imperatives that propelled a cycle of stunted careers for "working girls." "The conviction that women's place was in the home served to justify her restriction to lower-level clerical work," Margery Davies notes of the practice. "If women eventually were going to stop working to marry and have children, what was the point of promoting them to managerial or even higher-level clerical positions?"[23] It was the same with telegraphy. Nor is this a matter of glibly reading the situation through 20th-century radical and feminist lenses. Discussing the question of women's success within the craft in 1865, Lewis H. Smith, editor of the Telegrapher, wrote:

> The great fault has been in simply teaching a young lady the rudiments of the business and then cooping her up in a room by herself or with others of her sex, away from all chance of gaining knowledge, or emulating those who

> are in the first rank. If men and women could change places, how think you the former would come out? If we were hampered and excluded as women have been for centuries, where would be our boasted superiority?

Nearly two decades later, the Operator's W.J. Johnston made essentially the same point. "As matters now stand," he argued, "there are no inducements to women to give excellent service. No matter how expert they become, how faithfully they labor, how polite and attentive they are to the patrons of the wires, there is no hope of promotions for them." Their "taking no pride in their work and looking forward to marriage as a welcome means of escape from distasteful drudgery" were hardly surprising under the circumstances, Johnston concluded.[24] Young women had been working and marrying long before the existence of the Western Union. Both the company and young women in Gilded Age America had something to offer each other, but the Western Union emerged from the partnership with much the better bargain.

It was the rare lady operator who entered the field as a lark. Telegraphy meant serious breadwinning, not diversion or "pin money." For one thing, even mediocre skill was a matter of at least one or two years' training and practice, during which period a student had to otherwise

support herself (as the check-girls did while they learned on the job) or rely on the cushion of family, friends, or savings. Either way, learning the craft did not come cheaply. In a society whose women ideally did not work outside the home, the presence of a woman in the telegraph office meant a need to be there.

"A majority of the lady operators in the telegraphic profession," the Electric Age noted in 1887, "are with us from necessity and not from choice." Denying charges that women remained in telegraphy to go husband-hunting, a Cincinnatian wrote that most of her sisters "follow the profession of operating for a livelihood." It could mean the livelihood of others, too. During the 1883 walkout, a Boston telegrapher said that "a good many" of her colleagues gave "all they earn from week to week" to help prop up dependent relatives. One New York striker went through an agonizing sequence of resigning from the Brotherhood and then rejoining her comrades because she had initially feared for the wages that were the only income for her invalid mother. Predicting on the third day of the strike that the "girls" would soon return to work, the Western Union's William Dealy explained that they were "bound to come back, for they are in financial straits." And after the union's defeat an agitated and indignant Charlotte Smith, head of the Women's National Industrial League, addressing the Senate Education and

Labor Committee's hearings in behalf of women operators refused re-employment, told the lawmakers that some had "aged parents dependent upon them for support," and that many were "entirely dependent on their labor for their own support and the support of their friends" as well.[25] Statistical evidence also indicates that female operators were full-fledged wage-earners. Among 102 of them living in New York in 1880, a solid majority--59.8%--were either self-supporting or part of families lacking a male breadwinner as head of the household.[26]

Varying circumstances sent young women into the cubicles of the Western Union. A genuine need to work did not always imply desperate poverty. Empty stomachs and empty coal scuttles at home could force a daughter to learn Morse, but so might perceptions of appropriate comfort and status.

Some operators' salaries did meet needs that were vital. Twenty-two-year-old Georgianna Rodman was the sole support of her widowed mother in 1880. So were Agnes Bradley and Augusta Boyton. The Flanagan sisters, Ellen and Annie, supported their mother--likewise widowed--with the aid of their laborer brother, but all three also had to support another brother who was paralyzed. Nor was a "normal" family, with its breadwinning patriarch, always a guarantee that daughters were spared the rigors of the labor market. For Ellen Ryan, 28-year-old daughter

of an Irish-born laborer, working a wire may have meant meeting the elemental demands of food, clothing, and shelter. Perhaps the same was true of Ann Clark. Her father worked, too, but his earnings as a watchman were doubtless low. Ann's salary as a telegrapher could have meant the difference between bread and coffee, and steak, eggs, and potatoes at the Clarks' daily breakfast table.[27]

A daughter's wage could also augment family income to satisfy important, if less pressing, desires: an upright for the parlor, a sibling's education, capital for a family business, or a standard of living commensurate with middle-class or labor-aristocratic notions of respectability. "Jo," a female operator in Toronto in 1875, argued that surplus daughters puttering around the house were simply "a great waste of material," for

> if, as is often the case, their father's income happens to be too small to maintain them in comfort, is it not far better and more sensible for some of them to start out in the world and earn their own living, than to stay at home vainly endeavoring to find some plan of making one dollar do the work of two?

That kind of reasoning may have influenced Albert C. Clapp, a paperhanger in the Boston suburb of Hyde Park and the father of six. In 1872, his oldest daughter Lizzie, then 14, began telegraphing in the local railroad depot. Lizzie's wages could have served as a kind of economic insurance for the Clapps--Albert told the census enumerator in 1880 that he had been out of work for a year--but they

could also have helped to maintain a way of life for the large family worthy of a substantial Yankee mechanic.[28] Like her two brothers, Mary Sheridan worked a key in New York in 1880, and their three salaries, together with that of their father, a clerk, may well have underwritten a thoroughly middle-class existence. In Molly Fitzpatrick's case, her contribution certainly did. Also a New York operator in 1880, her income, and that of her widowed mother as a music teacher, were enough to add a live-in servant to their household.[29]

Retaining the accouterments of affluence was as important as acquiring them. In the late 19th century, the caprices of a market economy might quickly and dramatically change a family's situation. The solidity of the great American middle class was often more apparent than real, and having a daughter capable of working could help to check a family's downward slide. Cindy Aron's imaginative study of federal clerks suggests that a small but significant number of middle-class women sought government positions to do just that when sickness, death, or the business cycle rendered male breadwinners impotent.[30] The same circumstances created lady operators. "In the vicissitudes of life," declared Norvin Green in 1890, "the changes of fortune and the decrees of fate in our larger cities, so many young women are thrown upon their resources that it is a blessing to find this

new field of employment." Green's comments, self-serving as always, nevertheless described a part of contemporary reality. So did Lida Churchill's 1882 novel, My Girls, one of whose characters, Grace Farwell, became a telegrapher after her father, a cotton mill superintendent, had to retire under the pressure of failing health. "Compelled by the failure and subsequent death of her father to support herself, or to become a burden upon her mother," Nattie Rogers, another contemporary novel heroine, also chose the key.[31]

Demographic pressures, too, put women between glass partitions. Even if they wanted to, not all women married. Discussing the question of women and work in 1869, the New York Times, citing census reports, claimed that the American population suffered from an imbalance of females over males in the 15 to 30-year-old age group. "In other words," concluded the Times, "there are, in the New-England and Middle States, for instance, a quarter of a million young women who must support themselves, and who cannot reasonably look forward to any matrimonial alliance which will relieve them of this inevitable necessity." Whatever the truth to this argument, some women operators did stick to a key rather than count on the certainty of marriage. Apphira Eaton, 37 in 1880 when the census recorded her living with her brother and sister-in-law, was likely to remain single. The same was probably

true of Francis Whipple, also 37, who boarded alone.[32]

Population vagaries and marriage patterns affected Irish-American women even more than those of other ethnic groups, and contributed to the goodly number of them who became telegraphers. Reacting to the trauma of the Great Famine of the 1840s, the Irish had dramatically reduced the proportion of their young adults who married at home, and exported many others--young women in particular--who sought a better life as emigrants. Conditions in the United States were different, but the new patterns of marrying late or not at all persisted among the first and succeeding generations. It became neither shameful nor unusual for Irish-American sons and daughters to forgo marriage. The social and economic consequences were especially important for the women: Irish-Americans were more likely than other (white) women to be independent, life-long wage earners. What's more, as Hasia Diner found, they "could take advantage of opportunities in fields like teaching and nursing which essentially required that women choose between job or matrimony." They could also enter telegraphy. Among a sample of 102 female operators in New York in 1880, by far the largest percentage of foreign-born parents (46%) were Irish. It was no coincidence that the unmarried, 30-year-old career manager, Kate Donovan, had an Irish mother and father. Frances Dailey, another prominent woman chief,

was very likely of similar background. Telegraphy attracted many Hibernian men, too, of course, but the uniquely combined forces of demography, contemporary history, and culture explain what sent many Irish-American women into the craft.[33]

Subsistence and custom were sharp goads, but choice, as well as compulsion, turned young women into operators. The very nature of the calling made this so, since a fairly long period of training and the need for a good common school (or even high school) education restricted entry to the field. A "girl" did not become an operator with the same speed and informality that she became a mill hand, domestic, or sales clerk. The notion of choice for working women goes beyond the specific conditions of telegraphy. Thomas Dublin, studying antebellum Yankee mill "girls," has argued that they went to work not from dire need but from a combination of their having become economically superfluous in their parents' farm households, an attraction to the excitement and variety of city life, and a desire for economic and social independence. All were interrelated, and the last seems especially important, since it at once raised the family's living standard (directly or indirectly) and hollowed out a niche of autonomy for the working "girl." A daughter's self-sufficiency and choice were more important than would immediately appear, since status as a wage earner, with

its corollary of independence, undermined parental (and, weighter still, patriarchal) authority. This is clear in the case of Irish-American women, with their proclivity for breadwinning and celibate careers.[34] And all of this implied choice. "For my part," one operator told an Irish World correspondent during the Great Strike, "I can say I could live without the Company, but I have always desired honest work and consequent independence." "It is not a choice between telegraphy and starvation," another woman asserted in 1875. "The ability and independence which enables [sic] a lady to become a successful operator would gain her a living in a dozen other ways." And the sort of choice and self-determination inherent in being an operator inevitably touched on the question of marriage. Made fatherless, Wired Love's Nattie Rogers "chose the more independent but harder course," by learning Morse, since "she was not the kind of girl to sit down and wait for some one to come along and marry her, and relieve her of the burden of self support." The prospect of self-support was far less burdensome than that of a joyless match to Jo, a Canadian operator in the mid-70s. "Many women accept the first man who offers himself," she wrote,

> simply for the sake of securing some one to take care of them, while if they were taught to take care of themselves, they could afford to wait for some one whom it would not be perjury

> for them to swear to love and honor; or, in case such a one never came to them, they could live comfortable, happy lives alone. I admit, freely enough, that a happy marriage is the best possible fate for a woman, but if she is unable to secure that, her whole life should not be a failure in consequence.

Even the clear-headed and free-spirited Jo had to genuflect before prevailing convention: marriage was ideally "right" for a woman. But the promptings of other forces--family needs and aspirations, folkways, and the desire to control and enjoy one's own life--meant that being a Lady of the Key was "right" too.[35]

Social origins as well as economic exigencies led a woman into the telegraph office. Operators came of varying backgrounds--more so, in any case, than contemporary mill hands, laundresses, or settlement-house workers--but all of them, in entering the craft, were at once making and being made part of an unprecedented social stratum, a "new" lower-middle class.

In contrast, some had grown up amid the more traditional surroundings of rural America. These were native-born, mostly Protestant young women, the daughters of farmers, professionals, small tradesmen, and mechanics. Their antebellum counterparts had flocked to New England's textile mills until speedups and immigrant masses drove

them out, and they now held keys where their mothers or grandmothers had held bobbins. What the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1872 called "intelligent American women,--girls such as today find employment as bookkeepers, telegraph-operators, compositors, teachers, artists, etc.," probably accounted for most of the nation's female operators up through the 1870s.[36] The rural woman operator was a stock character in the sub-genre of telegraph fiction. Walter P. Phillips evoked his native Massachusetts countryside by creating "Narcissa," the charming but "by no means cultivated" daughter of a farmer's widow who applied her mediocre skills to an out-of-the-way office. The more proficient Nattie Rogers, of Wired Love, also had rustic origins.[37]

Nattie and Narcissa had plenty of real models. Lisiades Atherton, an operator at Milwaukee equally noteworthy for her skill and her tragic early death at 19, had begun to send and receive three years before in Hastings, Minnesota. Lizzie Clapp had also died while still in her teens, the victim of a freak accident while on duty, but she was otherwise quite representative of the Yankee "girls" who served as village operators. Her father Albert, a Massachusetts native, and her mother Louisa, born in Maine, no doubt raised Lizzie with injunctions to piety, hard work, and sobriety, for she belonged to the local lodge of the Good Templars, and

several members of that abstemious order, "in full regalia," took part in her funeral cortege. Happier to relate were the experiences of two other small-town telegraphers, Fannie and Julia Wheeler. Residents of Vinton, Iowa, they probably learned the craft in the 1860s from their father, W.H. Wheeler, station agent of the local depot. Julia, the younger sister, took care of business in the Vinton office, later quitting to attend school, but Fannie, perhaps more talented and certainly more ambitious, rose to successively higher positions and bigger towns: first to Waterloo, then to Chicago (where she headed the Ladies' Department in 1869), then on to Omaha. By 1875, with "a responsible position at a good salary," she called San Francisco her home.[38] Fannie was significant not only for her typically native, rural origins and her atypically rewarding career, but for her cityward movement. While some, like Julia, remained country operators, the nature of the medium, inextricably part of the "metropolitan corridor" of industrializing America, made telegraphy an implicitly urban occupation. Fannie joined millions of others drawn to the nation's growing cities, for the "new" lower-middle class of technical and clerical workers that included operators was really an urban middle class.[39]

"Girls" who began operating in the railway stations of sleepy hamlets mingled with city-bred women in the

large metropolitan telegraph offices. Like many of the newcomers, some came from native, middle-class backgrounds. New Yorker Emily Sutherland, twenty in 1880, lived with her widower uncle who was a bank cashier. Eliza Edward, too, lived with an uncle while she worked as an operator; he was an entrepreneur who dealt in stationery. As with the female government clerks that Cindy Aron traced in the same era, the association of a relatively desirable form of women's work with those of middle-class origins makes sense.[40] Probably into the 1870s, urban lady operators were as likely to have such a background as their country sisters. But by the time of the Great Strike, if not earlier, a large proportion of the telegraph "girls" in the cities were the daughters of working men, often from Irish-American families.

Part of the evidence for this is impressionistic. In 1869, for example, the New York Times noted that the Cooper Union's free telegraphy course for young women had been a response to "the late strikes of the working classes." Such schools, whether legitimate or fly-by-night, apparently attracted a considerable working-class clientele. When the Electric Age reprinted newspaper exposes of fraudulent "colleges" in the late 80s, the typical victim was a shopgirl who had imagined telegraphy as an escape hatch for her and "an invalid mother from a dirty sixth-floor tenement apartment."[41]

Part of the evidence is inferential. By the late 19th century, second and third-generation Irish-American women were eschewing the menial jobs that their immigrant forebears had settled for, and, in swelling numbers, entering professional (or semi-professional) fields: in hospitals as nurses, in classrooms as teachers, in offices as stenographers, bookkeepers, clerks, and "typewriters." For the most part, they were the daughters of working-class parents, and along with their brothers, they represented their ethnic group's having "arrived"--as did several Irish-Americans who won important mayoralties--and its contribution of recruits to a middle class undergoing recasting. The cultural dimensions of this I will explore below; what is important here were the origins of urban women plying white-collar pursuits. One such pursuit was telegraphy.[42]

To this soft evidence of impression and inference I would add some hard data. From among a sample of New York operators whose father's (or male household head's) occupation in 1880 I could determine, 65% were blue-collar men, evenly divided between skilled and unskilled (or semi-skilled) callings. Not surprisingly, the second largest group of fathers were white-collar employees: clerks such as the fathers of Sarah Weeks and Ellen Spencer, or Maine-born Bella Stover's stepfather, a travelling agent. But the large percentage of craftsmen or laborer

fathers remains remarkable. So was the Irish element. Better than half (52%) of all the parents were natives of Ireland, and if Irish descent were the criterion, the figure would surely be higher. Peering into the households of some of these "girls" shows this mixture of class, ethnicity, and generation at work. We do not know what Mary Hickey's immigrant father's occupation was since he was laid up with pleurisy and so, to the census taker, "at home." But Mary helped to support the family along with two sisters and two brothers--a book-folder, dressmaker, shipping clerk, and, like Mary, a telegrapher. At 15, Louise Finigan may still have been a check-girl, but her brother was already a full-fledged operator, and both of them supplemented the earnings of their father, a shoemaker by trade. Mary Trenamin's link with Ireland, telegraphy, and the working class was through her father, a 37-year-old lineman. If May Sheridan's father hoped to see his children do better than he had as a janitor, he was no doubt pleased that May and her two brothers had all learned their Morse and now had a place at the key. Ellen Gartlony's father was dead, and his occupation once he arrived in America remains a mystery, but both Ellen and her brother were operators. Nineteen-year-old Elizabeth Pollard was also fatherless. Although born in England, her parents were Hibernians, and by 1880, she joined two brothers in the telegraph

office (one an operator, the other a clerk) to provide for their mother and two siblings in school. Anne McShea's only brother had progressed so far as to announce himself as a "broker" to the census taker. Anne, of course, was an operator. She and her brother left the house each morning to enter a world of work far removed from that of their father, an Irish-born street-car driver.[43]

Since most employments open to females were physically demanding, dirty, stultifying, and ill-paid, white-collar work was especially attractive. True, telegraphy was not easy, and its women suffered from a discriminatory wage structure, but it contrasted favorably with factory, laundry, domestic service, and the various retail "clerking" positions. It was, in short, "a nice occupation, and better than standing in stores or working in mills," as one woman described her calling in 1875.[44]

Operators took more home on payday than the average working "girl." With a few exceptions, they were among the best paid of their sex. In 1869, the New York Times found telegraphers, at $10 a week, in the same range as schoolteachers, compositors, and wood engravers. They were not so fortunate as actresses ($15) or editors ($18), but better off than book-folders ($8) and hoop-skirt makers ($7); and much better off than paper-box makers ($5) and live-in domestics ($2.50). At the time of the Great Strike, operators still ranked fairly high as female wage earners.

One Boston survey gave a telegraphers' average weekly salary as $6.87, which approximated those of copyists ($6.78) and bookkeepers ($6.55), fell behind that of nurses and proof-readers ($9.50), but well outdistanced those of cap makers ($4.42), cotton-mill operatives ($3.94), and cash girls ($2.02).[45]

Prestige, as well as income, was higher for lady operators. Telegraphy demanded a general education above the average. Its workday milieu required standards of dress and deportment unusual in the experience of most female breadwinners.[46] It was appropriately feminine because it savored of domesticity. A woman compelled to earn a living, Godey's Lady's Book had decreed in 1853, "should be encouraged to learn and undertake" "all in-door pursuits," since "these harmonize with her natural love of home and its duties, from which she should never, in idea, be divorced." Telegraphy fit easily enough into that scheme. Little wonder, wrote the Western Union's James Reid in 1870, that "so simple, so clean, so apparently domestic" an employment as telegraphy should draw on women. And it was as respectable as it was domestic. If we can believe Martha Rayne, not only did Frances Dailey allow her staff at 195 Broadway to do needlework between dispatches, but she made "Miss" mandatory in the operating room, much as it might have been in any other polite setting. "It does not soil their dresses;" Rayne

reported, "it does not keep them in a standing posture; it does not, they say, compromise them socially." Telegraphy was a genteel way for a young woman to earn a living.[47]

This was gentility of a new kind, though, no longer within a patrician setting, but tracing the cultural ambit of an emerging stratum of "brain workers." As with male telegraphers, the experience of the women reveals the uncertainty, contradiction, and synthesis that marked the gestation of this new class.

Three forces molded the operators socially. The Western Union did, of course. Like its wire network, the giant corporation was unprecedented. But the operating room also partook of the traditional world of the counting house: the "boiled" shirts and frock-coats, the inkwells and ledgers, the "Mr." and "Miss" that imbued employees with a standardized reserve and dignity. This was all "old" middle class, at least in form--corporate discipline was probably as much a motive as mercantile courtliness in the Western Union. Secondly, some operators had come out of that same "old" middle class: daughters of rural "middling" families or the city bourgeoisie who settled (or perhaps fell down) into telegraphy. They brought their past with them into the office. The third influence came from the working-class neighborhoods of urban America where check-girls and their older sisters

grew up and continued to live during their tenure at the key. Representing a significant part of the new work force, these women were sensitive gauges of the tensions that class formation involved.

In a sense, they were neither working class nor middle class, or, perhaps, they were simultaneously both. Entering telegraphy from working-class homes involved mobility, but it need not have been simply upward mobility; moving sideways was possible, too. Still, working-class women did entertain notions of moving "up." Irish women, for example, were a crucial link between their largely working-class backgrounds and the realm of the middle class. "Observers both within and without the Irish communities," notes Hasia Diner, "agreed that women in families, as wives, daughters, and sisters, brought the family 'up,' civilized them by introducing the manners and accouterments of the middle class." Not that it was an easy task, for Diner adds that "Irish men resented this effort to make them over into refined Americans." The working-class "girl" who became an operator might have to fight a constant cultural tug-of-war with her family, and perhaps with herself, too.[48]

But not always. The lower-middle-class world of the telegraph office could also converge with existing blue-collar values rather than jar them. Ileen De Vault has argued that labor aristocrats accepted their daughters'

entry into clerical work because it dovetailed with their values at the same time that it kept their standard of living high. As such, a daughter's move was not out of, but within, the working class.[49] This was partly true, both according to their view of things and by the young woman's joining what some have called a white-collar proletariat. Ideas of proper appearance, behavior, and taste could also represent cultural convergence, since they were as much a part of the respectable working-class home--what Leon Fink aptly christens "popular gentility"--as of the middle-class one.[50] But convergence was not stasis. Between blue-collar father and white-collar daughter, a dialectic was creating a gray-collar family.

Augusta Killian, a New York telegrapher in 1880, belonged to such a family. Her German immigrant father was a stone mason, and, like him, two of Augusta's siblings had working-class occupations: one brother as a car driver, and one sister as a silk factory hand. But another brother, who worked in a store, inhabited the same lower-middle-class cosmos as his operator sister. Laura Moore's father was a painter, and her brother followed the same calling. Yet her sister, a saleslady, shared Laura's nebulous position of being of, but no longer in, the working class. In Mary O'Meara's case, it was her eldest brother who headed the household. The census taker recorded him as a "collector dry goods," presumably

a clerical job of some kind. As office folk, he and Mary would have had a good deal in common--at least much more so than with another brother living with them who worked in the unambiguously blue-collar setting of the machinist. Cultural instability, if not tension, was inherent in gray-collar families. Thomas P. Getz' 1889 vaudeville ditty, "Since My Daughter Plays on the Typewriter," had a troubled working-class paterfamilias declare of his white-collar daughter:

> She cries in her sleep, "Your letter's to hand,"
> She calls her old father esquire;
> And the neighbors they shout when my daughter
> turns out,
> There goes Bridget Typewriter Maguire.

Or Bridget Telegraph Maguire.[51]

An impression persists that many operators struck a precarious social balance as children of the working class and pioneers in a new mass middle stratum. Hewing to standards of feminine reticence and "refinement" was part of this. Such behavior was not simply a sham or a mindless aping of middle-class forms. The piano solos that several New York women strikers played aboard an excursion steamer during the walkout had doubtless first been performed amid the overstuffed politeness of someone's front parlor. After the defeat, Charlotte Smith, the reformer who had taken a number of unemployed women telegraphers under her wing, told a Senate hearing that she could not discuss their plight in detail "because

very many of them would feel it very keenly if their names should be mentioned." When they did speak, they chose their words carefully. "The ladies are among our most earnest members," declared one Brotherhood man in New York, "but they do not like the word 'strike.' They think it sounds more dignified to say 'resign.'"[52]

Dignity and refinement found expression in appearance, too, for dress is a prime statement of social position--or of one's perception of one's social position. Respectable dress was a de facto uniform in the telegraph office. Proper appearance grew as much from company rules as self-image. And, as Martha Rayne reported in 1883, dressing up to her profession could nearly bankrupt a young operator: "her office dress, even if she made it herself, will take eight dollars out of her pocket-book; her bills for other clothes, for shoes, for hats--well, it is easy enough for her to expend ten dollars every week in the year, and her salary is not nine dollars." Probably many of the "girls" did make their own wardrobe. One of the force at 195 Broadway, noting that "lady operators of this office are among the most tastefully attired working women in this City," explained[53]

> that in many cases the very skill and taste so displayed are the production of their own brains and artistic fingers. Many of them could testify to "burning the midnight oil" for this purpose, and that, too, after a long and hard day's work at the key.

The elegant exterior that belied an operator's economic fragility sometimes hinted at a cultural fragility to match. A Boston Globe reporter described a striking telegrapher he interviewed as "tastefully dressed," with "a parasol and satchel in her hand." He continued: "No one would have taken her for a telegraph operator, simply because there is nothing distinctive about an operator that a casual eye can distinguish. To the trained observer, however, there are certain characteristics that are unmistakable." What were they? He never shared them with his readers, but he seemed to imply that the operator's clothes had been "off" in subtle details that in effect hung a sign around her neck saying, "Lower Middle Class." On the street, the daughter of a surgeon or Presbyterian minister would not have taken the telegrapher for one of her own kind.[54]

The world of the women operators bespoke a peculiarly wobbly gentility in other ways--and not always due to working-class origins. Those without family, or who struck out on their own, usually lived in boarding houses. Such places varied, of course, but there seems to have been much of the socially nebulous about them that resonates so well with the lower-middle-class universe of 19th-century America. The Hotel Norman in which Wired Love's Nattie Rogers rented a room was not actually a boarding house, but its environment was probably similar to that in

which many young operators like Nattie passed their evenings. Nattie's back room was surrounded by a dreary montage of "sheds in greater or less degree of dilapidation, a sickly grape-vine, a line of flapping sheets, an overflowing ash-barrel," "the dulcet notes of old rag-men, the serenades of musical cats," and "the strains of a cornet played upon at intervals from nine P.M. to twelve, with the evident purpose of exhausting superfluous air in the performer's lungs."[55]

Even the noon meal posed a problem for an operator's cultural integrity. Despite middle-class garb, operators often kept down expenses by bringing their lunches along with them, as might an ordinary working man or woman. The imperfect fit between tasteful dress and plebeian dinner pails was no trivial point. Dorothy Richardson, who had grown up in a middle-class home in rural Pennsylvania, recalled that while job-hunting in New York City around 1900, she put propriety before nourishment, skipping lunch, "which I could have had done up for me at the boarding-house without extra charge, but which my silly vanity did not allow me to carry around under my arm." But for many lady operators--less proud or less firmly middle class in the old mold--toting a lunch box was no problem.[56]

Speech, too, indicated the social limbo in which a telegrapher lived and worked. Unfortunately, very little from the mouths of contemporary women operators survives,

but one Boston woman did talk to a reporter. She was the same "tastefully dressed" operator whose clothing contained arcane signs of her social place. And so, I think, did her speech:[57]

> "The truth is," she remarked, "that although most of the lady operators are willing to cooperate in every way to bring about the just demands of the strikers, they rather hang back from public demonstrations."
>
> "Why?"
>
> "Well, I suppose because most of them are well-bred women with considerable refinement. They have to be to make good operators. I don't know any other reason."

And a little later:

> "But you will generally find that the girls employed as operators are better off than almost any other class of women who have to earn their living because," she added, "having acquired a good education, and coming from respectable families, they are not apt to be so extravagant or foolish as some others."

The affirmations of "refinement," "respectable families" and "good education," and of proper feminine reticence, have a slightly strained, almost defensive quality. Likewise the determination to distance operators from "extravagant" and "foolish" others--presumably overdressed factory "girls." Not that she did not sincerely believe herself to be refined and well-bred, and act accordingly; but the refinement of the gray-collar world was new and tentative, and so eagerly, even over-eagerly asserted. The same kind of tension surfaced when a "girl"

momentarily strayed from the bounds of "refined" speech. The Electric Age humorist Edward Delaney ("De") wrote "A Lady Operator's Reverie" in 1887, a sketch of the random thoughts of a bored young woman working a key at Western Union headquarters. "Gracious," she muses at one point, "how I use slang here, lately. I must quit that, it's not ladylike." Disgusted by the tobacco chewing of a male co-worker, she tells herself sarcastically, "He'd be a nice man for a refined girl to marry, wouldn't he?" Still contemplating matrimony, she thinks further on: "There ought to be a law to make all rich men marry poor girls and all poor men marry rich girls. Then there would be an equal division of property. Ain't that a Henry George idea, eh?" The point is not that the cynical and conservative "De" knew what female operators thought or felt. But he does draw a plausible picture of a preoccupation with refinement and of grammatical lapses and bits of slang that he could have genuinely observed in working with some of these women.[58] Nor is Delaney the only witness. In 1879, the Operator's column of news from 195 Broadway icily complained that[59]

> The ladies who, in their anxiety to be considered up with the times, stoop to the use of slang, make a most deplorable mistake. To hear them utter the now familiar "way off," with an ease that denotes constant repitition, produces a feeling of disgust in those who make the slightest claim to refinement of feeling. It is bad enough for a man to come to this, but there

> is no excuse whatever for one who pretends to be a lady. . . .

Many telegraphers were freshly-minted "ladies" from blue-collar homes. Their dress, speech, and mannerisms, if sometimes awkward, were signs of having to straddle a line between two social worlds. Members and makers of a new lower-middle class, they were in flux and sui generis.[60]

"The brotherhood have induced so many of the young women to join them," John Mitchell remarked a few days before the Great Strike, "that the title of the organization might well be changed to 'The Brotherhood and Sisterhood of Telegraphers.'"[61] Mitchell was right, but less because of the sheer numbers of women operators who became unionists and strikers than for the behavior and commitment of those who did so. Part of what makes the 1883 walkout important was the disproportionate role that its female actors played.

In the broader context of Gilded Age telegraphy, women were likewise far more important, in their male counterparts' eyes, than their numbers alone warranted. With less than chivalrous motives, many Knights of the Key focused attention and concern on the women: attention on their small but growing share of the field, and concern

that they would undermine the salary structure and turn what had been a promising new profession into one as ill-paid and feminized as the needle trades. This did not actually happen until well into the next century, but the fears were reasonable enough, given the state of the craft in the postbellum years. The number of operators--male as well as female--rose at the same time that opportunities declined. Nominal salaries shrank, and "plug factories" to mass-produce telegraphers seemed as ubiquitous as corner saloons. What's more, women were invading the traditionally male bailiwick of the office, as clerks, secretaries, "typewriters," and so forth, and taking much less money to perform those jobs. The same was true of telephony which, unlike telegraphy, was heavily female almost from the start. Feminization proceeded unevenly throughout the late 19th century, but it was a plausible threat to male telegraphers.[62]

And so they often viewed the women who shared their calling with ambivalence, if not downright hostility. As early as the 1860s, some tried to tack a NO GIRLS ALLOWED sign to the craft's front door. "What operators should do to protect themselves from 'hard times,'" wrote one in 1864, "is to keep the ladies out of the National Telegraphic Union, and also as much as possible off the lines." The next year, the NTU virtually followed his advice when its convention refused to adopt a clause

explicitly welcoming female members.[63] Anti-woman sentiments persisted through the 1870s and 80s. Men indicted women operators for poaching in the male preserve of breadwinning and, by swelling the reservoir of operators, degrading the status and well-being of the craft. Nor did the egalitarian impulse of 1883 erase such attitudes. "We have shrunk from saying anything that might wound the feelings of any of our sister operators," a Washington man told the Telegraphers' Advocate in 1885, and then went on to inflict such a wound. Another accused the women who remained in the business of being self-defeating, since by doing so they had "reduced their own prospects by reducing salaries to a point where men cannot marry." Such arguments usually included the corollary that woman's place was in the conjugal home and not the telegraph office. A letter to the Electric Age in 1887 predicted that the competition between male and female telegraphers and ensuing falling salaries, "if followed to its legitimate conclusion, will break up the marriage state and result in what? community life, polygamous life or barbarous life?"[64]

Real and imagined corporate policies stimulated these fears. Managers did see advantages in using female operators. They were cheaper to begin with, and easier than men to keep that way because docile and tractable. They were also more honest and reliable. Lady operators

seldom, if ever, slipped a hand into the office till or showed up for duty with a hangover. "As regards expertness, quickness of intelligence, and faithfulness to duty, they are unexceptionable," the Boston Herald noted, "and were it not that comparisons are odious, it could be borne out by statistics that women as managers and operators in small offices are better bargains for the company than men." Those fearing a female invasion did not confine the danger to branch offices. "It is understood," a member of the Buffalo Western Union force wrote before the Great Strike, "that the policy of the manager now is to fill all vacancies with ladies--at about one-half the price formerly paid, of course."[65]

Men invoking the female threat frequently linked it with the "teaching," or "student" problem, and the proliferation of "telegraph colleges" (or "plug factories") whence the flood of operators depressing the salary level came. The plug factory evil incarnate was the telegraphy course at the Cooper Union in New York City. Begun as a joint venture of the Institute and the Western Union in 1869, the free school's modest early crop of alumnae emerged armed with the skills of the key as well as some knowledge of record and bookkeeping and the care of batteries. The potential of the school was explicit from the outset. The Institute's annual report of 1869 declared that "the experience of the telegraph companies

has gradually but surely convinced the managers that their interests would be greatly promoted by the substitution of women for men in the greater number of offices." They were undoubtedly right, but such a transformation was easier said than done. By the 1880s, the school was still running, turning out 50-60 graduates a year. Knights of the Key fervently cursed the Cooper school, but it probably hurt female operators more than males.[66]

Far less alarming to the operators who pointed in horror at the stream of young women clutching plug-factory diplomas in their hands was the possibility that the companies would combine women with machines to strip the men of their skill and jobs. Jeremiads about the failing health of the craft seldom made connections between technology and the "woman question." This is surprising, partly because the occupation was so suffused with the technological, and partly because the relation between technology, skill, and labor costs was no secret. As early as 1869, the Journal of the Telegraph, remarking on a strike at the rival Franklin Telegraph Company, quietly warned Western Union employees that a strike "separates interests which should be one, and stimulates invention to make labor unnecessary, or revenge for interference." It was clear, too, that such invention always envisioned cheap female labor supplanting that of costlier males. And this is exactly what eventually happened, beginning

substantially in the World War I era, with the increasing use of the teletypewriter.[67] But until then, a combination of technological dead-ends and the high turnover and low mobility of women with the craft (the latter two cyclically reinforcing each other) insured a continuing majority of male operators.

Plausible threat though the women had seemed, not all men blamed them for the woes of the calling. Some combined sympathy with paternalistic gallantry, like the Frederick, Maryland man who appealed to his colleagues in 1868 "as fathers, husbands, brothers, and as men" to welcome the lady operators and thus spare them the alternative of the "repugnant positions" that working women often had to take. Less generously, some might chide the women for their supposed faults--like the operator who wrote during the Civil War of their "overbearing and uncourteous manner of transacting business over the wires," affected style of sending ("clipping"), and poor penmanship--but still accept them as craftmates. When "Susannah," a New York operator, asked the Telegrapher's editor whether she could join the NTU "without marrying one of its members," he assured her that "No gentleman will dare refuse you admittance if you meet the requirements." During the following two decades, others spoke up in favor of the women. "I regret that women are obliged to compete with men in the struggle for existence,"

James P. Kohler, a New York telegrapher and Henry George disciple, wrote in 1887, "but I do not blame the women." If hard times had fallen on the Knights of the Key, it was not due to the women in the profession but "to a maladjustment of economic conditions and the monopoly, by a few, of those gifts which the Creator intended for the use of all."[68]

The most vigorous defense of the women coincided with the rise of the Brotherhood and the Great Strike of 1883. The bill of grievances that precipitated the walk-out contained the demand "that both sexes shall receive equal pay for equal work," a tenet which had become Brotherhood policy at the union's founding 1882 convention. Within a year it was a shibboleth among telegraph activists. "On the subject of grading the operators according to ability on the salary lists, without regard to sex," the New York Times reported five days before the strike, "there is a unanimity of feeling among the male operators that is surprising. 'Equal pay for equal service' is an expression that frequently falls from the lips of the men who are most earnestly enlisted in what they call this crusade of reform."[69] As good Knights of Labor, Brotherhood men were obliged to condemn the wage disparity since the Order held all "producers," regardless of race or gender, to be equal. Confronting the Western Union with the equal pay demand, a leading Boston operator

explained, had come "from a sense of justice to the lady operators, who are as much overworked and underpaid in their departments as the men."[70]

It had also come from a calculated appreciation of the dynamics of the labor market. The clause in the Brotherhood's 1882 declaration of principles that limited members to passing on the craft to a "brother, sister, son or daughter" was as concerned with reducing the number of operators as affirming the equality of women. "We do not object to women learning the business and getting positions as operators," a New Yorker said, "but we do object to their being employed at half the pay received by men." If that were to continue, "the men would soon have to make a living at something else."[71] Corporate officials read much darker motives behind the union's equal pay principle. "The demand that both sexes shall be paid the same for like service looks to the driving of women labor from the ranks," snorted General Eckert. Vice-President F.H. May, of the American Rapid Company, dismissed it as "a hit against the girls." The reason, they claimed, was that the women, consistently less skilled than the men, would, were they granted equal pay, be sacked in favor of the equally expensive, but much more productive male operators.[72]

One of the very few things on which the Brotherhood and the companies agreed was that women got far lower

salaries than men. Explaining the mechanics of what telegraphers loosely called the "sliding scale" form of wage cuts, "an intelligent-looking girl, who agitated a fan quite nervously as she spoke," told an Irish World correspondent that

> a male operator with $80 a month being discharged or his services discontinued, one of our sex--our pay being much lower--will be ordered to take the vacant place, and although we are able to fill the duties of the absent one, we will not get the salary belonging to that particular post but only the half of it which we had in our original position.

She probably exaggerated the wage differential, but it was still substantial. John Campbell guessed that it was somewhere between 25% and 35%. The Western Union's Walter Humstone put it even higher, at around 50%, a figure with which at least one activist agreed. Others cited examples approaching the 100% disparity that the fidgety "girl" had claimed. Such cases doubtless existed, but the 50% advantage for men seems to have been the rule. In terms of averages, this meant $54 a month for men and $36 for women, using the Brotherhood's national figures, or, with the Western Union's, around $65 and $43, respectively.[73]

The question of pay inevitably led to that of ability. Here too, there was a good deal of agreement between Brotherhood and corporate spokesmen: women, on the whole, were inferior operators. (It was over whether those few who did do work equal to men were underpaid that they

wrangled.) Both antagonists shared a belief in the inherent physical inability of women to work heavy wires. In such first-class work as market reporting and news dispatches, Eugene O'Connor testified, female operators "could not be relied upon," for "the nervous system of women would not allow it." Norvin Green concurred, telling the same Senate committee, "I doubt whether they have sufficient strength, because operating a heavy wire is pretty trying work." Veteran telegrapher Thomas Edison supported the equal pay demand, but still thought women unable to match men at the key. "It requires the commercial instinct and judgment to be a strictly first-class operator, and women don't have those qualifications and can't acquire them," he explained.[74]

But commerce was hardly an instinct, and wiser critics of female operators than the Wizard of Menlo Park pointed out that training and culture accounted for the mediocrity of most Ladies of the Key. Women were poor operators, one of their number wrote in 1876, because they were lazy, and that made it all the more disgraceful, since "no other business offer[ed] greater scope to an intelligent, conscientious, go-ahead-active woman" than telegraphy. If women would only apply themselves, she argued, "there will be fewer 'bulls' [errors] credited to us, and we shall be the recipients of fewer sneers and hypocritical condescentions [sic] from our brothers."

The brothers could certainly be unkind. "I wonder why it is male operators are more patient with each other than with us, poor daughters of Eve," mused a New York woman in 1864. "Don't we need gentleness, forebearance, and all the other virtues to get along with some of them, I should just like to know?"[75] High turnover (and corporate policies that perpetuated it) and social conventions that made it unlikely that a woman could "talk oil and stocks and machinery and trade as fast and as well as the men" explained the generally low skill level of the "girls," not genes.[76] Some flatly denied the inferiority charges. "A woman can do as much as a man in this business, and do it as well," a female manager said in 1875, "but does not get the same pay for it." Discussing branch office managers during the Great Strike, the Boston Herald concluded:

> Selfish superintendents may talk of women's proverbial inaccuracy, her impressionable nature, her energy, that displays itself by fits and starts, her sudden attacks of fatigue or depression, and they may draw fancy pictures of business arrested or stopped altogether by a wholesale abandonment to flirting and gossiping, yet her whole record in the telegraphic service is a most emphatic and eloquent denial.

One striker turned the usual sex bias on its head and claimed that her sisters were more accurate telegraphers than the men. "We've kept an account of that," the "blonde little lady, with blue eyes and a vivacious expression" told a reporter. "Men always try to know what

the message means; women only try to know what it says. They stick to the text and they're oftener on the safe side."[77]

They also stuck to the Brotherhood, which actively sought their support and championed their cause with the equal pay demand. The Springfield Republican thought it noteworthy "that the young women among the skilled operators who are out, are given leading places in the councils, and their 'rights' are recognized as equal to and the same as those of the men." In consequence, feminists lauded the union. Mrs. Lillie Devereux-Blake, president of the New York State Woman's Suffrage Association, addressed a strike meeting and thanked the Brotherhood for its egalitarianism. Boston papers reported "several women well known in public movements" raising money for the strikers because of the pro-woman clause. Henry George, who had many reasons to cheer on the Brotherhood, included the equal pay demand among them. More conservative voices also found the union's stance on the women praiseworthy. It was "absolutely just," declared the New York Times; "a species of 'women's rights' that all will subscribe to in time," predicted the Cleveland Plain Dealer; something that "will not be disputed by any just person," concluded the New Orleans Picayune.[78] Traditional labor union usage took on an expanded aspect during the walkout: when the Local Assembly of Oil City, Pennsylvania

sent a message of solidarity and encouragement to the Chicago strikers, it began, significantly, "Dear Brothers and Sisters."[79]

How many lady operators this egalitarian crusade attracted is unclear. In an inherently confusing situation, news accounts suffered further from the self-serving information that union and company provided. Accounts of the numbers of women striking, and of their proportion within the Brotherhood, are contradictory and nearly impossible to sort out. Take the case at Boston on the first day: The New York Times had "all but three" of the female Western Union force quitting, but the Boston Herald reported that only four had struck, "some of them shedding copious tears, but whether of joy or sorrow it is difficult to determine." It is just as difficult to determine which figure was correct. If the mere number of reports is any guide, women operators were evidently less likely to initially walk out than males, although once they struck, they outdid the men in tenacity.[80]

"Feminine" reticence explains why some women stayed at their keys. A Canadian Knight of Labor remarked in 1883 (not in connection with the strike) that the Order's secrecy was a boon to recruiting women because it "allowed them to avoid public notoriety and protected their modesty." But striking was neither private nor modest. One New York operator, although a staunch striker, raised the same

point. Unhappy with their condition, she and her sisters had nevertheless

> submitted uncomplainingly to this treatment sooner than undergo the notoriety of blazoning it before the public, and we would, I believe, still labor under it did not the strike opportunely give us a chance of amending our condition.

Perhaps such restraints influenced the 20 "girls" at 195 Broadway whose planned walkout, on July 23, never took place. Fear of unladylike self-assertion, deference to male managers, financial need, and tactical errors of the Brotherhood contributed to the reluctance.[81]

Women not only failed to strike, but scabbed against the Brotherhood. Some were part of the reserves that the Western Union drew on from their branch office force. Some were graduates of the various plug factories, including the Cooper Union school, who found a sudden demand for their services in what was normally a depressingly tight job market. "The stream of applicants for situations was a steady one, made up largely of girls," a New York journal reported the first day. The "improved condition" at the Boston Western Union office about one week later was supposed to be "due to the women operators now employed by the company." How important women scabs were in the eventual defeat of the Brotherhood is unclear. They did furnish a ready supply of strikebreakers, but apparently few were taking over the vital heavy wires. They were

probably a cause, though not a crucial one, of the union's collapse.[82]

Female renegades appeared, too. At Cleveland, the Local Assembly angrily expelled Anna Read and Anna Wyman for not having followed their comrades out of the office. Later it did the same to Kate Skinner, who had been out for twenty days and drawn $20 in strike pay before she, and three others, turned "traitors." In New York, Hattie Wilkins was one of five women included on a Telegraphers' Advocate "Black List" of those "who thought it more honorable to be bribed by the Western Union Telegraph Company than to stand by their obligation to an organization which was established by themselves for their own benefit."[83] It was also possible to betray the Western Union, though. Under the pressure of overwork, some either broke down or, like the young woman who had been "compelled to work with the key in her right hand, while she held a sandwich in her left," not only quit her instrument but joined the Brotherhood. And some, while remaining at work, secretly provided the union with reports on conditions inside the operating rooms.[84]

But it was the unequivocal enthusiasm, support, and loyalty of women strikers in 1883 that impressed contemporaries, and was a matter of such frequent comment as to become a virtual cliche in the daily accounts of the episode. Their model dedication even won the respect of a

couple of senior Western Union managers. Almost two weeks into the strike, Press Agent William B. Somerville admitted that "but one lady operator" had forsaken the union, "and she came back just after she struck." After the defeat, District Superintendent Humstone called the small number of women apostates "very creditable to the female portion of the brotherhood."[85]

Propriety and female modesty did not mean modest backing for the Brotherhood's struggle. "In talking with the strikers the girls generally speak more determinedly than the men in regard to fighting the thing out to the bitter end," the New York Tribune reported. "We are out for business," declared one spirited lady operator, proudly noting that "not a girl who was a member of the Brotherhood flinched" when the whistle blew. Another woman was said to have vowed to her manager to "fight with pick-axe, gun, sword, and pistols if necessary" before yielding to the corporation. At a New York strike meeting, Master Workman John Mitchell read this note "from one of our sisters":

> Great inducements were offered to me yesterday to go to the main office, and it gave me great pleasure to refuse. Whether it will harm me I cannot say, but I don't care.

Someone shouted, "She's a good one," and the audience cheered in agreement.[86] Carrie Gettings was a good one, too. Despite threats from her superintendent, she refused

to transmit Western Union business in her Tallahassee, Florida office. Further up in Georgia, a company official acknowledged that the La Grange and West Point offices--managed, respectively, by Misses Parrott and Chisolm--were the only ones shut down in the state. Northern "girls" showed equal grit. Although in need of a job, Detroiter Mamie Edwards refused a local manager's plea to scab and work "dishonorably." After the collapse at Cleveland, Miss Ruth E. Pumphrey and Mrs. E.W. Collins declined their male colleagues' suggestion that they be given preference in rehiring since, as one of them explained, they had "done no more than behooves honorable operators."[87]

If one person symbolized the militant young woman telegrapher of 1883, it was the Worthy Forewoman of the New York Brotherhood, Minnie E. Swan. "She is a very bright, intelligent young lady, and apparently highly respected and esteemed by her associates," the Times noted. It might have added that she was also highly skilled in her craft. The year before, Swan had been part of the Cincinnati Western Union force and, while on a visit to New York, decided to move there, winding up in the B & O office. By June 1883, eager for a more rewarding outlet for her talents, she quit the B & O and took a key in a brokerage house.[88] Her telegraphic accomplishments made her unlike most of her sisters; but she shared, and

expressed, their determination to beat the Western Union and their devotion to the Brotherhood. "The brotherhood need fear no desertions from my flock," she assured a strike meeting. "If the men remain as firm as we are we will never dip our flag, but will go back to our posts with flying colors. We went into this battle to win, and we will fight to the bitter end." And if worse came to worst? "You will find that in case of defeat the girls will not be the first to give in."[89]

Swan and the other "girls" backed up their words with deeds, impressing and inspiring their male co-unionists. The women's behavior bucked up male spirits even as the strike passed into August and its outcome appeared increasingly dubious. A dispatch from Cincinnati noted that the absolute loyalty of the Local Assembly's 15 lady operators "tends to bind the strikers more closely." From Brooklyn, a heartfelt message simply declared: "The ladies, God bless them, will mark our prosperity and success by their example." More specifically, the Irish World pointed out how

> the gentler sex in this great strike have, by their energetic and earnest action set an example to the men which must have been of the utmost advantage in inspiring the latter with courage and resolution to carry on the fight. A noticeable and gratifying feature of the struggle is the good order and sobriety observable at all the meetings.

More than once, the Boston women were supposed to have kept

a large number of their wavering brothers from breaking ranks and scrambling back to the office. And when the end came, some ex-strikers did join a Western Union-bound stampede--in contrast to the women. "Elsewhere, as here," reported the New York Times on the day of capitulation, "the lady operators were the last to yield and apply for reinstatement."[90]

Some of them had difficulty in getting back their jobs, at least initially. About 50 in New York, and an indeterminate number in other cities found managers turning them away when they applied to return to work. Brotherhood partisans immediately accused the Western Union of carrying out a vendetta against the women for their outstanding loyalty as strikers. Reformer Charlotte Smith, who had taken the part of the unemployed women, addressed the Senate Education and Labor Committee's hearings "in behalf of these noble women who are told by this monopoly that they cannot go back to work." John Mitchell charged that the Western Union had made a special effort to blacklist the most needy "girls" "as a punishment and warning to others. . . . It is terrible to think that this powerful corporation is getting revenge in such a manner." The powerful corporation had a different story. Since most women were second-class operators, and since there were so many such inferior operators crowding the labor market, it had been easy to quickly replace most women strikers.

There was probably a good deal of truth in this argument. Not that the Western Union wasn't vindictive; it had kept a blacklist for years, and intimidation and harrassment were as much a part of the firm as glass insulators. The company doubtless treated leading activists as dangerous enemies. It is no surprise that John Campbell's subsequent managerial career was in the rival Postal Telegraph Company. But women were at a disadvantage in an already tight job market, corporate terrorism notwithstanding.[91]

In any case, no one disputed the women strikers' having remained true to their union vows and their male shopmates. If defections are any indication, they put the men to shame during the Great Strike. It remains to ask why this was so.

It stemmed in part from a sense of gratitude and a desire to reciprocate the consideration that the Brotherhood had shown in its equal pay demand. Despite nods of editorial agreement from the New York Times and its like, economic parity for women hardly reflected the social consensus of the day. As District Assembly 45 of the Knights of Labor, the telegraphers' union bound itself to the Order's pledge that neither race nor sex would be tolerated as significant divisions among producers. It is reasonable to think that the women operators felt heartened and grateful for this support and returned the compliment in kind.

Beyond gratitude, pride also moved the lady operators: conscious of themselves as breadwinners, they were eager to prove themselves capable of holding up their end of the struggle as good trade unionists. "They say girls can't keep a secret," one of them told a reporter at the first strike meeting. "I think we have kept this secret pretty well. The girls are fully as enthusiastic as the men in this matter." In a similar, if earthier vein, prominent labor leader P.J. Maguire told a Brotherhood gathering, "If you men are half as good as your women you will come out all right. I have seen women hold out better than the men and when the men weakened I have seen the women lick 'em." As full-time wage-earners, women such as the operators were more inclined to assert themselves in workplace matters. Daniel Walkowitz has suggested that women from households lacking a traditional patriarchal head--as perhaps a majority of the telegraph "girls" came from--may have been more likely to actively champion their rights as workers, filling in, as it were, for the absent father.[92] And all the more so if they were Irish-Americans. "Within the marketplace," Hasia Diner notes, "Irish culture allowed women to be assertive and, if need be, to defy Victorian standards of respectable feminine behavior. This aggressiveness," she concludes, "can help to explain the extremely active involvement of Irish women in the American labor movement." In cities

such as New York and Boston, this surely was part of the reason for the lady operators' bristling performance.[93]

But the telegraphers were also creatures of a social order in which women, at least ideally, were allotted a sphere and role of their own. It embraced hearth and home, purity and morality, nurture, cooperation, refinement, reticence--a sphere that, given the crucible of the capitalist market place and the industrial workplace, could produce a powerful but ambivalent mix.

A decided moralism permeated the women operators' activism. "I appeal especially to the ladies," Brotherhood spokesman Thomas O'Reilly declared at the first strike meeting. "Set us a good example and we will follow it." Six of the women present, in spontaneous chorus, exclaimed, "We will," and indeed they did. After the strike, a female operator recalled how, "when there were signs of weakening two or three of us girls mounted the platform and said that a man with a spark of manhood would not go down to Number 195 [Broadway] and accept blood money so long as a girl remained out. That kept them firm." Manhood meant strength, womanhood meant <u>moral</u> strength. Woman as a moral force in the telegraph office long predated the Great Strike. Male operators and managers both spoke of the "elevating" influence that the women had on the craft. "I smoke, and frequently sit with my feet upon the table," confessed one Knight of the Key in

1875, adding, "Yet, were ladies present, I should do neither." The year before, the Operator had asked the women

> for further aid in putting down the numerous disgraceful habits and practices we men have fallen into--intemperance, profanity, chewing tobacco, the use of low slang, slovenly personal appearance, untidy instruments and desks, disorderly offices, even dishonesty--and they will not disappoint us if suitable opportunities to make their influence felt are afforded them.

So it was not surprising that in 1883, too, the women should provide moral leadership. Minnie Swan called a basket of pond lillies sent the women operators a symbol of "the purity of their cause." And when the Western Union plied its male scabs with free cigars, the Worthy Forewoman remarked, "We girls don't smoke, you know, and so Western Union cigars don't tempt us"--making clear the equation of the feminine and the delicate with the loyal and the incorruptible.[94]

Like the telegraph office, the strike had become a kind of transfigured domestic sphere in which women served as the stewardesses of morality and constancy; where the world of defection, of bribery and betrayal, of the renunciation of brotherhood and sisterhood were kept outside the door, just as the mistress of the Victorian household shut out the world of work, competition, and profanity from her bailiwick of refuge.[95]

It is ironic, but not surprising, that the very

stuff of Gilded Age society and culture could simultaneously undermine itself. This is hardly an original insight on my part, but it is important. Late 19th-century American society, like the economic system that shaped it, was freighted with internal contradiction.[96] By being good and moral women, the telegraphers became active and faithful unionists and, in their way, militant workers. From the Western Union's point of view, they had certainly become bad employees. The dialectic at work here is far from clear-cut, and the women doubtless suffered tension and ambivalence in these halting explorations of new roles. Nor should we read too much into the record of the "girls" during the strike. Their actions still fell largely within the bounds of acceptable female behavior. If they trooped out on strike with their male cohorts in defiance of corporate power and avarice, they did so by chastely using the separate women's exits and stairways.[97]

But understating the significance of the new ground traversed in the summer of 1883 would be equally foolish. The Great Strike had threatened more than the prerogatives of the Western Union. By walking off the job, the women telegraphers had been doubly insurgent: for opposing their employer as Labor opposing Capital, and for bucking the hierarchy and patriarchy that the massive operating room represented. Men led the strike, it is true, but they also led the Western Union. The women's exemplary

dedication to the Brotherhood, at least in part, rested on its male leaders' professions of egalitarianism. The "girls" had chosen to assert themselves as both workers and women. Daughters had become Sisters.

N O T E S

[1]BG, July 19, 1883; see also NYH, July 20, 1883, which reported only three women fainting.

[2]James D. Reid, The Telegraph in America (New York, 1879), pp. 170-171; Telegrapher, Oct. 31, 1864 and July 3, 1875; Virginia Penny, The Employments of Women (Boston, 1863), pp. 101-102; Alvin F. Harlow, Old Wires and New Waves (New York, 1936), p. 420; Albert Rhodes, "Women's Occupations," Galaxy, Jan. 1876, p. 52; Frances E. Willard, Occupations for Women (New York, 1897), p. 132.

[3]U.S. 1880 Census manuscript schedules for New York City, comprising Enumeration Districts 7-524, all in Supervisor District 1. I compiled the sample by taking the first 102 women listed as telegraph operators. In a few cases, the occupation given was vague, such as "telegraph" or "telegraph office," but even if actually check-girls, such women were potentially operators, or, if clerks, were likely to be socially similar (if not identical) to the telegraphers in the same office. Source hereafter cited as 1880 Sample.

For corroborative data on women operators' age, nativity, and marital status, see the following census abstracts: Ninth Census (1870), Vol. I, pp. 706-707; Tenth Census (1880), Vol. I, p. 757; Eleventh Census (1890), Vol. I, Pt. II, pp. 356-357, 374-375, 415; and Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Sixth Annual Report (Boston, 1875), p. 96; idem, Fifteenth Annual Report (Boston, 1884), pp. 8, 39, 42.

[4]Ninth Census, Vol. I, pp. 676, 688; Tenth Census, Vol. I, pp. 778, 794; Eleventh Census, Vol. I, Pt. II, p. 304; Twelfth Census (1900), Vol. II, Pt. II, p. 506; Reid, Telegraph in America, p. 575; idem, The Telegraph in America (New York, 1886 edition), pp. 636, 653, 666.

During the Great Strike, John Campbell estimated that 5% of the nation's operators were women, probably a close guess. Senate, Report of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital (Washington, 1885), Vol. I, p. 116.

The percentage of women employees, within the Western Union, at least, varied with region. In 1886, the Eastern Division had the highest proportion (11%), the Southern the lowest (2%), and the Central was indeed central, with 6%. Reid, Telegraph in America (1886 ed.).

In 1907, in the main and branch offices of the Western Union and Postal companies in Pittsburgh, women made up 31% of the city's operating force. Elizabeth Beardsley Butler, Women and The Trades (New York, 1911), p. 292).

The figures from 1900-1940, indicative of the growing feminization and mechanization of telegraphy (which would be much more dramatic after World War II), are as follows:

1900	7,229	(12% of all operators)
1910	8,219	(12%)
1920	16,860	(21%)
1930	16,122	(24%)
1940	8,228	(20%)

Sources: Thirteenth Census (1910), Vol. IV, p. 93; Fourteenth Census (1920), Vol. IV, p. 40; Fifteenth Census (1930), Vol. V, p. 45; Sixteenth Census (1940), Population, Vol. III, Pt. 1, p. 76.

[5]JT, Nov. 2, 1868 and July 15, 1876; TA, June 1, 1883; Senate, Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 886; EA, Oct. 1, 1886; for women running branch and depot offices, see also TA, July 16, 1883; EA, June 1, Sept. 1, 16, Oct. 1 and 16, 1886, Oct. 1, 1887; BH, July 15, 1883; Penny, Employments of Women, p. 101; Operator, Mar. 1, 1881.

Women operators in small offices were common in Britain, too, according to Norvin Green. Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 891.

For the conditions and problems of women branch operators in 1907, see Charities and The Commons, Oct. 5, 1907, p. 864.

[6]TA, Aug. 1, 1883; Massachusetts BLS, Sixth Annual Report, p. 94; Telegrapher, Jan. 21, 1871; Maine Bureau of Industrial and Labor Statistics, Second Annual Report (Augusta, 1889), pp. 78-79; JT, Sept. 15, 1871; EA, May 16, 1887.

[7]Butler, Women and the Trades, p. 294.

[8]Martha Louise Rayne, What Can a Woman Do? (Detroit, 1885), p. 140; for a picture of women operators at work at 195 Broadway in 1889, one of whom does indeed appear to be doing needlework of some kind at her cubicle, see Charles L. Buckingham, "The Telegraph of To-Day," Scribner's, July 1889, p. 6.

[9]BG, July 28, 1883; Massachusetts BLS, Sixth Annual Report, p. 96, see also p. 95.

[10]JT, May 15, 1869 and Feb. 15, 1875; see also NYT, July 20, 1883; NYTr, July 20, 1883; EA, Apr. 16, 1887.

Such segregated seating may have relaxed by the late 80s, at least at 195 Broadway; one view of the main operating room seems to show mixed seating. See Buckingham, "Telegraph of To-Day," p. 5.

For a picture showing women operators at work in the Postal Telegraph Company's New York headquarters in 1896, see R.R. Bowker, ed., "Great American Industries, XII--Electricity," Harper's, Oct. 1896, p. 734.

The British government-run telegraph service, which employed many female operators, strictly segregated them from males in large offices. Operator, Dec. 15, 1874.

[11]TA, June 16, 1883; see also Operator, May 15, 1876.

[12]JT, May 15, 1869 and Feb. 15, 1875; Operator, May 15, 1875; Reid, Telegraph in America (1879 ed.), p. 572; Rayne, What Can a Woman Do?, p. 136; NYT, July 20, 1883; EA, Apr. 16, 1887.

The proportion of women in the metropolitan main offices evidently varied between ca. 31% and 25% in the period.

[13]Telegrapher, Oct. 15, 1870 and Mar. 6, 1875; Rayne, What Can a Woman Do?, p. 139.

[14]Broker positions were especially desirable (and rare). They demanded great skill, of course, but hours were relatively short (perhaps 10 A.M.-3:30 P.M. in a typical Wall Street office in 1883), pay relatively high, and working conditions more akin to a traditional counting-house clerkship than the "industrial" setting of a 195 Broadway. Rayne, What Can a Woman Do?, pp. 142-143.

[15]Ella Cheever Thayer, Wired Love (New York, 1879), pp. 28-29; Rayne, What Can a Woman Do?, pp. 136-137; Willard, Occupations for Women, p. 133; Operator, Sept. 15, 1880 and May 16, 1885; for a picture of a check-girl at work, see Buckingham, "Telegraph of To-Day," p. 6.

Check-girls earned $15-$25 a month in the 1880s and 90s. Frances Willard claimed that the company was allowing the girls practice time "under the direction of a competent instructor" by 1897.

By 1919, little seems to have changed for women pursuing a career as Morse operators. A survey of women's work noted that check-girl apprenticeships were still the rule, with the company allowing one hour's daily practice, but added that she "may stay after regular office hours to practice if she is ambitious, and not too weary. For

the girl who studies this way the time of probation is often long and tiresome." The same study also noted that check-girls so apprenticed were often given preference in hiring over graduates of telegraph courses in schools because of their practical experience. Helen Christine Hoerle and Florence B. Saltzberg, The Girl and the Job (New York, 1919), p. 70.

[16]Rayne, What Can a Woman Do?, p. 141; Hoerle and Saltzberg, Girl and the Job, pp. 71-72; Butler, Women and the Trades, p. 369; EA, Oct. 16, 1886; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 895; see also BH, July 24, 1883.

[17]EA, June 1, 1886; TA, June 1, 1883; Operator, July 2, 1883 and May 2, 1885; for highly-skilled women operators, see also JT, May 2, 1870; Telegrapher, Jan. 2, 1875; Operator, June 15, 1884; Massachusetts BLS, Sixth Annual Report, p. 95.

[18]1880 Sample; EA, Feb. 1, 1887.

[19]1880 Sample; Operator, May 15, 1875 and June 15, 1884; EA, June 1, 1886 and May 16, 1887; Reid, Telegraph in America (1879 ed.), p. 572; idem, 1886 ed., pp. 732-733; for two other women managers' careers (Kate E. Donovan and Fannie Wheeler), see Reid, 1886 ed., pp. 732-733; Operator, Feb. 1, 1880; 1880 Sample; Telegrapher, Jan. 2, 1875.

There are a few other women operators who may have spent more than a few years at the work, but about whose careers I am less certain because of differences in name spellings or names common enough to have belonged to two different operators. Still, consider the following possibilities, all in New York:

C. Breier: At 195 Broadway in 1875; perhaps the same as Caroline Braer in the 1880 Sample. If so, 18 years old in 1875 and still an operator 5 years later.

M.F. Curran: At 195 Broadway in 1875; perhaps the same as Margaret or Mary Curran (sisters, both operators in 1880). If Mary, 18, in 1875; if Margaret, 12; and again, a 5-year tenure at the key.

A.F. Elliott: 195 Broadway in 1875. Same as Annie Elliott, a 20-year-old operator in 1880?

V. Enright: At 195 Broadway in 1875. Same as Veronica Enright, a 22-year-old operator in 1880?

J.A. Purson: At 195 Broadway in 1875. Same as Josephine Pierson, 23 in 1880?

E.L. Ross: At 195 Broadway in 1875. Same as Elisa Rosa (or Ross), 25 in 1880?

S. Dougherty: Clerk at 195 Broadway in 1875. Same as Sarah Dougherty, a 23-year-old operator in 1880?
J. Malone: Clerk, 195 Broadway, 1875. Same as Janey Malone, 19-year-old operator in 1880?
L.E. McGuire: Operator at the B&O, 1887. Same as Lizzie McGuire, 18-year-old operator in 1880?
M.E. Treneman: Operator at the B&O, 1887. Same as Mary Trenamin, 13-year-old operator (or check-girl) in 1880?

Sources: Operator, May 15, 1875; EA, May 16, 1887; 1880 Sample.

[20]1880 Sample; Reid, Telegraph in America (1886), pp. 732-733.

[21]JT, Dec. 15, 1870; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 895; CPD, July 21, 1883; NYT, June 17, 1877; Charles H. Garland, "Women As Telegraphists," The Economic Journal, June 1901, p. 259; see also Willard, Occupations for Women, p. 134.

[22]EA, Oct. 16, 1886; on telegraphy as a dead-end career for women, see Willard, Occupations for Women, p. 134; George J. Manson, Work for Women (New York, 1883), p. 26; Thayer, Wired Love, p. 29; Lida A. Churchill, My Girls (Boston, 1882), p. 10; for the bleak prospects of women within the craft persisting up through the World War I era, see Hoerle and Saltzberg, Girl and the Job, pp. 71-72.

[23]Margery W. Davies, Woman's Place Is at the Typewriter (Philadelphia, 1982), p. 94, see also p. 172.

[24]Telegrapher, Feb. 27, 1865; Operator, Aug. 1, 1883.

[25]EA, Oct. 1, 1886 and May 2, 1887; BG, July 28, 1883; NYT, July 23, 1883; NYH, July 21, 1883; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 384; see also NYH, Aug. 21, 1883.

[26]1880 Sample. The exact configuration of the domicile patterns of the 102 operators was thus:

With father (or male relative) as household head	41 (40%)
With mother	32 (31.3%)
Boards (without parent)	26 (25.4%)
Independent household head	3 (2.9%)

In these respects, the telegraphers seem to have been typical of other young working women, especially those in the growing white-collar work force. Margery Davies notes that the white-collar working "girl" was

most likely to live at home and not to be the sole family breadwinner--a pattern to which the telegraphers, based on my sample, conform to. Among the women living with a parent, 90% of them were not the family's sole wage-earner. In fact, the figures Davies cites for Boston in 1900 come remarkably close to my sample:

Female clerical workers living at home	75.8%
Boarding or living w. employer	24.2%
Family heads	3.2%

Those from the 1900 census that she also uses, although less of a tight fit with my sample, are still close enough to convince me that my group is probably representative:

At home	81.7%
Boarding	18.3%
Family head	3.3%

See Davies, Woman's Place, pp. 74-75.

[27]1880 Sample; for working-class diet and living standards, see Massachusetts BLS, Sixth Annual Report, p. 221ff.

The EA complained in 1887 that too-young children were being forced to work in the field: "The telegraph offices have their full quota of infant talent. In the larger telegraph offices, it is a common thing to find little children struggling with the Morse alphabet, who do not know how to spell correctly." EA, Feb. 1, 1887.

For young female operators in Britain as support for parents, see NYT, June 17, 1877.

[28]Telegrapher, Apr. 10, 1875; U.S. Census manuscript schedules, Hyde Park (Norfolk County), Massachusetts, 1870, 1880; JT, July 15 and Aug. 1, 1876.

In 1870, 5 of Clapp's children, including 12-year-old Lizzie (recorded as Mary E.) and 14-year-old Charles, were in school. By 1880, although Lizzie was now gone and the youngest child present in 1870 (Conrad, born 1866) either dead or living elsewhere, the other surviving children all worked: Fred (Charles), 24, a painter; Etta, 21, a carpet factory employee; Eugene, 20, a horse dealer; and George, 18, a blacksmith. As she had in 1870, Mrs. Louisa Clapp kept house.

Perhaps the Emersons in the novel My Girls were a fictional counterpart to a family such as the Clapps. The father was a Rhode Island carpenter (and Civil War veteran) with six children. The oldest, daughter Cecil, became an operator in order to earn "more than would suffice for her barest necessities. . . ." Churchill, My Girls, pp. 19-22.

[29]1880 Sample. The servant was a 55-year-old Irishwoman. Both Molly (19) and her parents were native-born.

[30]Cindy S. Aron, "'To Barter Their Souls for Gold': Female Clerks in Federal Government Offices, 1862-1890," Journal of American History, Mar. 1981.

[31]Electrical World, Nov. 29, 1890; Churchill, My Girls, pp. 16-17; Thayer, Wired Love, p. 28; see also Davies, Woman's Place, p. 63.

[32]NYT, Mar. 17, 1869; 1880 Sample.

[33]Hasia R. Diner, Erin's Daughters in America (Baltimore, 1983), pp. 46, 94, see also p. 71; 1880 Sample.

The exact breakdown of nativity among the operators' parents (totaling 201 individuals) in the sample is:

Ireland	94 (46%)
U.S.	71 (35.3%)
Germany (incl. Switzerland)	16 (7.9%)
England	16 "
Scotland	2 (.9%)
Canada	2 "

If grandparents were traced, I suspect that the percentage of Irish descent would be even higher.

[34]Thomas Dublin, Women at Work (New York, 1979), pp. 35, 40; Diner, Erin's Daughters, p. 46.

[35]IW, Aug. 4, 1883; Telegrapher, Feb. 6 and Apr. 10, 1875; Thayer, Wired Love, p. 28; see also Churchill, My Girls, pp. 16-17, 28-29; EA, Oct. 1, 1886.

The EA's editor claimed that the low salaries of male operators and the economic independence of females gave the latter greater freedom in choosing to marry. Many female operators rejected suitors' proposals, he said, "because figures convince the lady the income is insufficient, when she considers that her independence is to be surrendered and instead of two salaries being divided between two persons, one pay must support both." EA, May 2, 1887.

[36]Massachusetts BLS, Third Annual Report (Boston, 1872), p. 112; on Yankee white-collar women, see Mary P. Ryan, Womanhood in America (New York, 1975), p. 199.

[37]Walter P. Phillips, Sketches Old and New (New York, 1897), pp. 105-114; Thayer, Wired Love, pp. 28-29; see also Churchill, My Girls, all of whose "girls" worked railroad "way" wires (though at least one was city-bred).

Dorothy Richardson was not an operator, though her background (a village in Pennsylvania, a Protestant, Scotch-Irish family) and proclivities (she taught school in the

village) made her similar to the operators I am discussing here. Richardson's parents died suddenly when she was 18 (ca. 1900), which prompted her to leave for New York seeking "lady-like" work. After a number of temporary and marginal factory jobs, she finally did get a white-collar position. Richardson, The Long Day, in William L. O'Neill, ed., Women at Work (Chicago, 1972), p. 17 and passim.

[38]JT, May 15, 1869, May 2, 1870 and Aug. 1, 1876; Census manuscript schedules, Hyde Park, Mass., 1880; Telegrapher, Jan. 2, 1875.

[39]Likewise Nattie Rogers: "So from a telegraph office in the country, where she learned the profession, she drifted to her present one in the city." Thayer, Wired Love, pp. 28-29; for the "metropolitan corridor," see John R. Stilgoe, Metropolitan Corridor (New Haven, 1983).

[40]1880 Sample; Aron, "'Barter Their Souls.'"

[41]NYT, Mar. 17, 1869; EA, Dec. 16, 1886 and July 1, 1887.

[42]Diner, Erin's Daughters, p. 46; see also David M. Katzman, Seven Days a Week (New York, 1978), pp. 231, 241; Ileen A. De Vault, "Work and Honor: The Daughters of Pittsburgh's Skilled Workers," unpub. paper.

[43]1880 Sample. The sample comprised 40 fathers (or male relative household heads), and they divided this way:

Skilled	13 (32.5%)
Unskilled or semi-skilled	13 "
White Collar	9 (22.5%)
Entrepreneurial	4 (10%)
Professional	1 (2.5%)

Their average age was 49.4

As for how representative my sample is, beyond the usual caveats attached to census figures and statistics generally, it may be quite representative, at least of urban operators. Forty seems like a small number, and it comes to about 3.5% of the nation's female telegraph employees recorded in 1880. But in the context of New York City, the sample becomes much more significant. I do not know how many female operators lived in New York (i.e., Manhattan) in 1880, but a few days before the Great Strike, the NYT (July 14) reported that the City contained about 200 of them (130 of whom worked at 195 Broadway). In 1880, there were presumably no more than that many, and probably less, since the trend was for the number of telegraphers

to rise with time. Figuring at most 200 women operators in 1880, the 40 I extracted from the census (those with male household heads) makes 20% of the total of the city's female force. This is a conservative estimate, but even so, 20% is a respectable sampling. For the broader group of 102 I would add the same claims, since they made up at least half of New York City's female operators in 1880 (and ca. 9% of the national total). This bears on the representativeness of the ethnicity, age, domicile, and marital status figures. I repeat, however, that my claim is for urban operators, and that while I think the high percentage of Irish ethnicity indicates a national pattern, I am sure that the figures would differ some if I had sampled Cincinnati, St. Louis, or Milwaukee instead of New York.

[44]Telegrapher, Apr. 10, 1875; Massachusetts BLS, Sixth Annual Report, p. 96.

The same operator also complained of poorly-arranged vacations and the generally draining and confining nature of the work. On the general desirability of white-collar work for Gilded Age women, see Davies, Woman's Place, pp. 64-65; Susan Porter Benson, "'The Customer Ain't God': The Work Culture of Department Store Saleswomen, 1890-1940," in Michael H. Frisch and Daniel J. Walkowitz, Working-Class America (Urbana, 1983), p. 188.

During the Great Strike, some women operators in Boston sought work as bookkeepers and clerks "until such time as the company indicates its desire for a compromise." BG, Aug. 6, 1883.

[45]NYT, Mar. 17, 1869; Massachusetts BLS, Fifteenth Annual Report, pp. 76-81; see also Rayne, What Can a Woman Do?, pp. 19-21; Massachusetts BLS, Third Annual Report, p. 101.

Up through the early 1900s, operators were still an elite among working women in terms of salary. See Butler, Women and the Trades, p. 338.

[46]It also implied a period of specialized training, although this, as I have noted, could come as an on-the-job apprenticeship for check-girls--something, incidentally, that I suspect made telegraphy even more appealing to working-class women than other white-collar jobs such as stenography and typing, which a girl might have to pay to learn in the growing number of private commercial courses (although they would eventually be available in public schools, too). On education and white-collar work for women, see Davies, Women's Place, Table 2; and Janice Weiss, "Educating for Clerical Work: The Nineteenth-Century

Private Commercial School," Journal of Social History, Spring 1981, p. 413.

As late as 1911, telegraphy was still prestigious women's work. Butler, Women and the Trades, p. 26.

[47]Godey's Lady's Book, July 1853, p. 84; JT, July 1, 1868 and Dec. 15, 1870; Rayne, What Can a Woman Do?, pp. 139-140; see also Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 935.

For a variation on the telegraphy-as-domesticity theme, see the short story, "An Autumn Episode," in which a small-town woman operator, charmed by a visiting expert "tramp" operator who "insisted on [her] giving her entire attention to her needlework, while he did the business," "smilingly surrendered her chair to the 'gentle gentleman' . . . and sat and sewed the afternoon away in a little rocker in the opposite corner." Phillips, Sketches, pp. 50-51.

[48]Diner, Erin's Daughters, p. 140, see also p. 71.

[49]De Vault, "Work and Honor," pp. 13ff.

De Vault says that the education and dress required of daughters in white-collar work demonstrated the father's capacity as an adequate wage earner and that the daughter would also not have to rub shoulders with the offspring of the unskilled immigrant in factory or similar menial work.

[50]Leon Fink, Workingmen's Democracy (Urbana, 1983), p. 94; see also Ch. III above.

[51]1880 Sample; De Vault, "Work and Honor," p. 17.

[52]NYT, July 14 and 23, 1883; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 384-385; see also U.S. Commissioner of Labor, Fourth Annual Report (Washington, 1889), pp. 46-47, which included telegraphers among the working women resident in the aggressively respectable and Protestant YWCA in New York.

[53]Rayne, What Can a Woman Do?, p. 141; EA, Aug. 16, 1886. Cf. Richardson, The Long Day, p. 194: "The neat costume, made with her own hands in midnight hours snatched from hard-earned rest, is no evidence of extravagance, or even of comfortable circumstances. It is only that manifestation of proper pride and self-respect which the best type of wage-earning woman is never without."

[54]BG, July 28, 1883.

[55]Thayer, Wired Love, pp. 25-26; elsewhere (p. 29) the author notes that Nattie preferred the Hotel Norman, bad as it was, to "living in that most unhomelike of all places, a boarding-house."

[56]Reid, Telegraph in America (1886 ed.), p. 739; Operator, Dec. 15, 1883; BH, July 20, 1883; Churchill, My Girls, p. 58; Richardson, The Long Day, pp. 19-20.

[57]BG, July 28, 1883.

In dealing with speech, it is important to note how crucial are nuances of expression, pronunciation, grammar, and so forth, and how difficult it is to be sure how accurately in this case the reporter captured them. Almost certainly, this interview, like most in contemporary newspapers, was not a verbatim transcription. "Not one newspaper man in a dozen," the CPD explained during the Great Strike, "resorts to short-hand writing or is familiar with it, and it is only on special occasions, when great detail and exactitude are required, that the trained short-hand writer is summoned in." (CPD, Aug. 15, 1883).

In fact, quotes in the papers in the 80s often have a stiff, formal sound. There were occasional attempts at naturalistic dialogue, but they were usually stylized versions of working-class or immigrant speech. The Senate hearings upon which I have extensively drawn were recorded verbatim, but contained no testimony of women telegraphers.

All of which is to say that my use of the interview is subject to qualification; but I still think that it, and most such pieces, were fairly honest attempts by reporters and editors to re-create interviews, and that the anonymous operator's words, though filtered through the ears and pens of male, middle-class journalists, still reflect the social ambiguity of many women like her.

[58]EA, Aug. 1, 1887. Despite Delaney's own biases, I think this piece (and his others), cautiously read, tell much about the world of Gilded Age operators. At another point in the "Reverie," he has the woman think, "Ma's going to the theatre to night and Bill's coming up." Her mother, in other words, is a widow--as many operators' mothers were, if the 1880 Sample is any guide.

[59]Operator, Sept. 1, 1879; see also EA, Feb. 1, 1887, for a complaint about check-girls picking up slang.

Slang was not in itself an unfailing guide to class origin, of course. Dorothy Richardson, of rural middle-class origin, found herself working with artificial flower-makers in New York around 1900, and recorded it as the happiest period of her working-class sojourn. Of her

shopmates, she wrote: "The talk was good, up-to-date English. There was rarely a mispronounced word, or a slip in grammar; and there was just enough well-selected slang to make the dialogue bright and to stamp the chatterers as conversant with the live questions of the day. The topics at all times bespoke clean minds and an intelligent point of view." Compare this with this self-description by a member of the women's force at 195 Broadway in 1886: "Generally speaking, the ladies find each other bright, interesting and witty, thoroughly posted on the current events of the day, and always ready to gauge their conversation to meet the mental requirements of their company, masculine as well as feminine." Richardson, The Long Day, pp. 184-185; EA, Aug. 16, 1886.

[60]There is another possible avenue for exploring the social world of the lady operators: marriage. Unfortunately, I have found very little on this. Certainly some of them married other operators. A staple of telegraph fiction was the meeting and courting of operators over the circuits they worked--Wired Love rested on just such a premise. And it was not merely fiction. "Many a telegraph romance, begun 'over the wire,' culminated in marriage," according to Minnie Swan Mitchell who as Minnie Swan had been a strike leader in 1883; she very likely wed another Brotherhood activist, John Mitchell. But how frequent such matches were is impossible to tell. There are hints that women operators saw their male craftmates as unlikely material because of the poor prospects of the field and the men's socially marginal status. Delaney's daydreamer is made to think, "I wouldn't marry an operator. They're no good. If I ever marry I want a business man, a man in a business that has some backbone to it." We can be skeptical of Delaney's claim to speak for women operators, but one real "girl" implied much the same thing. "If women take up telegraphy as a means of obtaining a husband, men can judge from the number of marriages contracted each year that girls very soon become disgusted with operators," a Cincinnati telegrapher wrote in 1886.

Probably telegraphers married within a band that took in the upper working class, the gray-collar lower-middle class, and the old, solid bourgeoisie, with the first two strata more common than the third. In 1895, for example, a widowed, respectable working-class woman who had done collar starching and been married to a molder, while clerking in a small, neighborhood grocery, met a telegrapher, whom she married. Perhaps marriage within such a range was typical, although in this case it was the male who was an operator. See Phillips, Sketches,

pp. 49-57, 75-88; Minnie Swan Mitchell, "Lingo of Telegraph Operators," American Speech, Apr. 1937, p. 155; EA, Oct. 1, 1886 and Aug. 1, 1887; "A Collar Starcher's Story," in David M. Katzman and William M. Tuttle, Jr., eds., Plain Folk (Urbana, 1982), p. 40.

[61]BH, July 15, 1883.

[62]Davies, Woman's Place, pp. 52f, 55, 91. There was a technological factor that interacted with class and culture. The telephone and typewriter were "gender neutral," and so easier to cast as "women's work" from the start. Also, the training for both, especially for a telephone operator, was less extensive and expensive that that of a telegrapher.

For arguments that telegraphy was really suited to be women's work, see, e.g., BH, Aug. 19, 1883; the Nation, Aug. 23, 1883.

[63]Telegrapher, Dec. 26, 1864 and Nov. 6, 1865. But the NTU constitution evidently did not actually bar them either. Ibid., Nov. 1, 1865.

[64]TA, Oct. 16, 1885; EA, Sept. 16, 1886 and Apr. 16, 1887; see also Telegrapher, July 3, 1875; Operator, June 1, 1883; NYT, Aug. 10, 1883; New York Bureau of Labor Statistics, Sixth Annual Report (Albany, 1889), p. 1039; Davies, Woman's Place, p. 91

[65]Penny, Employments of Women, pp. 101-102; BH, July 15, 1883; Rayne, What Can a Woman Do?, pp. 138-139, 143; Garland, "Women as Telegraphists," pp. 260-261; Operator, June 1, 1885; see also NYT, Aug. 10, 1883.

"As to a large class of our employes, however," said Norvin Green, "I have no doubt that we could get them for less than we are paying. I refer to the female operators. There is a large number of female operators unemployed in the city today, and there is great pressure among them for places--two or three hundred applicants." Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 907.

[66]JT, Apr. 15, May 1, 1868, May 1, Nov. 1, 1869, Dec. 15, 1870 and Oct. 16, 1871; NYT, Mar. 17, 1869; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 886; Operator, June 15, 1884; Rayne, What Can a Woman Do?, pp. 136, 141; EA, Nov. 1, 1886, May 11 and June 16, 1887.

The school evidently briefly accepted male applicants (with no promise of placing them). See JT, Apr. 1, 1870.

On telegraph schools and corporate training of

operators in the period and later, see also Thomas Woody, A History of Women's Education in the United States (New York, 1929), Vol. II, pp. 68-69; Hoerle and Saltzberg, Girl and the Job, p. 70; Senate, Final Report and Testimony Submitted to Congress by the Commission on Industrial Relations (Washington, 1916), Vol. X, pp. 9320-9321.

In 1893, the distribution of women in various business courses showed telegraphy far behind other subjects--only 1% of the 37,295 women enrolled in commercial "colleges" were learning telegraphy.

[67] JT, Nov. 1, 1869, Jan. 1, 1870; Telegrapher, Jan. 2, 1875; Charles Barnard, "The Telegraph of To-Day," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, Oct. 1881, pp. 714-716; BG, July 21, 1883; BH, July 19, 1883; BET, July 20, 1883; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 159-160, Vol. II, pp. 1272-1273; JSP, Jan. 24, 1886; EA, Feb. 1, 1887; Senate, Industrial Commission, Vol. X, pp. 9398-9399, 9408-9409, 9415-9416, 9423; Elizabeth Faulkner Baker, Technology and Women's Work (New York, 1964), pp. 244-245; Helen Hoerle, The Girl and Her Future (New York, 1932), pp. 47-48.

[68] JT, June 1, 1868; Telegrapher, Oct. 31, Nov. 28, 1864, Nov. 1, 1865 and Sept. 11, 1875; TA, Oct. 16, 1885; EA, May 2, 1887.

Not all Single-Taxers were kindly disposed toward women operators; see the letter of "Leonidas" in EA, Sept. 16, 1886.

[69] TA, Aug. 1, 1883; Executive Board, District Assembly 45, Brotherhood of Telegraphers of the United States and Canada, "Proceedings," (Pittsburgh, 1882), in Powderly Papers Collection, Catholic University (microfilm copy), p. 11; NYT, July 14 and 28, 1883; BH, July 15, 1883; BG, July 14, 1883; Springfield Republican, July 22, 1883 (hereafter cited as SR).

For an erroneous rumor that the Brotherhood would demand the exclusion of women, see NYT, July 11, 1883. For earlier arguments for equal pay, see Telegrapher, Feb. 27 and Apr. 3, 1875.

[70] BG, July 19, 1883; see also NOP, July 24, 1883.

An equal pay clause was also part of the New York Central Labor Union platform. Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 813.

[71] "Proceedings," p. 24, NYTr, July 16, 1883; see also CPD, July 13, 1883; NYTr, July 13, 1883.

The Knights of Labor's equal pay demand followed much the same logic. Declared organizer Richard Trevellick

at a Knights meeting in the 1880s: "Man must raise women up to his own status or capital would be used to bring man down to the present status of women." Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, Dreaming of What Might Be (Cambridge, Eng., 1982), pp. 320-321.

[72]NYT, July 18, 1883; NYH, July 18, 1883.

[73]IW, Aug. 4, 1883; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 103, 116, 188; BG, July 19 and 28, 1883; NYT, July 14 and 18, 1883; NOP, July 24, 1883; NYTr, July 13 and 17, 1883; NYH, July 17, 1883.

The range for women operators was $25-$60 a month as a rule; the elite of female broker operators reportedly got as much as $70-$90. Rural operators typically received $30-$40, those at summer resorts $30 plus board; branch operators in large urban hotels perhaps made $40-$50 a month, those in small ones, $15 plus board. See Manson, Work for Women, pp. 25-26; Rayne, What Can a Woman Do?, pp. 137, 143; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 886; Maine BLS, Second Annual Report, pp. 78-79, 104.

For claims of equal (or near-equal) pay in the early 1860s, see Penny, Employments of Women, pp. 101-102.

The problem of wage differentials, and demands for equal pay for equal work, were again issues in the national operators' strike of 1907. According to Elizabeth Butler, the pay bias was based on a two-tiered wage structure that reflected "the recruiting necessities of the position. The majority of women telegraph operators earn half what men do in the same offices, even when both are employed on light wires. The reason for this is that men are needed for heavy wires, but must be trained on light wires and kept there for the heavier service when needed. They must pass up through women's positions, but they are paid partly for what they do and partly as a reserve force. The competition here again is apparent not real." Strangely, Butler did not question the notion of "women's positions," accepting the cultural and economic logic behind them. Complaints about the successive cuts of the "sliding scale" were also part of the grievances and activism of 1907. Butler, Women and the Trades, pp. 293-294, 343; Charities and The Commons, Oct. 5, 1907.

[74]Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 191, 895; NYT, July 23, 1883; JSP, June 1, 1884; IW, Aug. 4, 1883; NYBLS, Third Annual Report (Albany, 1886), p. 153; Garland, "Women as Telegraphists," p. 260; NYH, July 21, 1883; see also Telegrapher, Jan. 30, 1865; Phillips, Sketches, pp. 49-57, 105-114; and for a later instance of the claim

of physical inferiority, Butler, Women and the Trades, p. 293.

Martha Rayne noted that women at 195 Broadway had a higher absentee rate than men. Margery Davies points out that arguments against introducing women into office work invoked "biological grounds" of physical weakness and frequent incapacity because of menstrual cycles. Rayne, What Can a Woman Do?, pp. 137-138; Davies, Woman's Place, p. 91.

For mention of the physical demands on operators' "nerves," see also Hoerle and Saltzberg, Girl and the Job, p. 69.

Norvin Green as much as admitted that his company did pay unequal salaries for equal work. He noted that there were a few female quad operators at 195 Broadway, and that their $70 salaries were "$10 or $15 less than we pay men. I presume, however," he continued, "that they are as well paid for the work they do as the men are, because, although they operate very well, I doubt whether they do as much work as the men. I doubt," the disingenuous doctor concluded, "whether they can get off as many words per hour as the men can."

[75]Operator, May 15, 1876; Telegrapher, Nov. 28, Dec. 26, 1864 and Jan. 21, 1871.

[76]Telegrapher, Feb. 27, 1865; Operator, Aug. 1, 1883; CPD, July 21, 1883; Senate, 43d Congress, 1st Session, Senate Report 242 (1874), p. 50; see also pp. 12-15 above.

[77]Massachusetts BLS, Sixth Annual Report, p. 96; BH, July 19, 1883; BG, July 28, 1883; see also Telegrapher, Dec. 26, 1864.

Discussing conditions in Pittsburgh in 1907, Elizabeth Butler noted that "although women work for the most part on light wires, the quantity of work done by given operators is fairly well equalized, and . . . the difference between a light and a heavy wire is less than would be supposed." This had an important bearing on the "sliding scale" strategy of the Western Union: "Although the work might tell on women sooner than on men, and although they might in some cases be less efficient than men, they were yet sufficiently capable to supersede men at a lower rate of pay. They were lending themselves to a scheme for cutting wages." (Women and the Trades, pp. 293-294.) This is what men were charging in the Gilded Age, but it is not clear to what extent this was true.

[78]SR, July 22, 1883; NYTr, July 21 and 29, 1883; NYT, July 20, 21 and 29, 1883; BH, Aug. 7, 1883; BET, July 19 and Aug. 7, 1883; CPD, July 17, 1883; NOP, July 18, 1883; see also BG, July 29, 1883.

[79]NYT, Aug. 5, 1883.

This was standard among the Knights of Labor, of course. See also BG, Aug. 15, 1883; CPD, July 23, 1883; NYTr, July 25, 1883; TA, Aug. 16, 1883.

[80]NYT, July 20, 1883; BH, July 20, 1883.

Again: The NYT, on July 20, reported that about 3/4 of the operators remaining were women, although only about 20 of them remained; but the NOP, same date, had Manager William Dealy claim that only 20 (out of 110) women had gone out. The following day, the Times reported (again, according to Dealy) that 80 of 160 operators at work were women.

As to the proportion of Brotherhood members, Eugene O'Connor claimed that 300-400 nationally were on strike, while a pre-strike meeting at New York, according to the NYT, contained about 25 women out of a gathering of 250 operators. Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 190; NYT, July 16, 1883.

[81]Kealey and Palmer, Dreaming of What Might Be, p. 144; IW, Aug. 4, 1883; BG, July 29, 1883; NYT, July 24, 1883; BH, July 24, 1883.

The aborted July 23 walkout called for one of the 20 women to blow a whistle as the signal for the others to quit. But "the lady who was to blow it didn't blow," explained Brotherhood member Minnie Donnelly, who blamed the failure on a "misunderstanding." Minnie Swan was less diplomatic. She said "that the case had been presented to [the women] in such a way as to give them the impression that the operators didn't care whether they came out or remained." When the women failed to strike, a number of Brotherhood men waiting outside the Western Union building "went away muttering something about the weaker sex having no pluck," the NYT reported.

One manager argued that the women who stayed at the key did so out of "conscience"--a belief that their own needs did not justify their inconveniencing the public. BG, Aug. 5, 1883.

[82]BG, July 20 and Aug. 11, 1883; NYT, July 20, 21, 28 and Aug. 12, 1883; BH, July 20, 1883; NOP, July 20, 1883; SR, July 23, 1883; NYTr, July 18, 1883.

In the 1870 strike, the Western Union quickly replaced the 8 women strikers in New York, and, if the JT

can be believed, used women scabs to take over "some of the leading wires" as well. In 1907, female scabs may have been decisive. Elizabeth Butler wrote that the companies broke the strike "in part through the agency of unorganized women. Most of the women went out when the men went out, but a few of them stayed in, and others who had formerly been in the employ of the company were impressed for the occasion." See Reid, Telegraph in America (1879 ed.), p. 548; JT, Jan. 15, 1870; Butler, Women and the Trades, p. 294.

[83]CPD, July 23, Aug. 16 and 18, 1883; TA, Aug. 16, 1883.

[84]BG, July 20, 21 and Aug. 11, 1883; NYT, July 26, 1883; NYTr, July 23, 1883; NYH, July 21 and 22, 1883.

[85]NYT, July 31, 1883; NYH, Aug. 19, 1883.

[86]NYTr, July 20 and 31, 1883; NYT, July 28, 1883; NYH, July 21, 1883.

[87]CPD, July 30 and Aug. 18, 1883; Atlanta Constitution, July 24, 1883; BG, July 23, 1883; for women's militancy and support, see also BG, July 16 and 20, 1883; TA, Aug. 16, 1883; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 190; NYT, July 14, 21 and 31, 1883; IW, Aug. 4, 1883; NYH, July 25 and 28, 1883; EA, Oct. 1, 1886.

There were charges that the Brotherhood had "bulldozed" women into joining the strike. After the conflict, Walter Humstone claimed that some operators told him that they had been swept along into the walkout in the excitement and confusion of the first day, and were not among the Brotherhood's pre-strike female members. BG, July 27, 1883; NYH, Aug. 19, 1883; NYTr, Aug. 5, 1883.

[88]NYT, July 25, 1883; Operator, Mar. 1, 1882; TA, June 1, 1883.

Swan did not strike against her broker employer; she hired a substitute so that she could devote full time to her union duties during the walkout.

[89]NYT, July 27, 1883; NYTr, July 28, 1883; see also NYT, July 23 and 28, 1883; NYH, July 28, 1883.

[90]BG, Aug. 13 and 18, 1883; CPD, Aug. 1, 1883; IW, Aug. 4, 1883; BH, Aug. 20, 1883; NYT, Aug. 18, 1883; see also CPD, July 27, 1883; NYT, Aug. 19, 24 and 25, 1883; IW, Aug. 11, 1883; Operator, Aug. 1, 1883.

A word on the participation and loyalty of women

operators in 1870 and 1907 is appropriate here. In 1870, the TPL evidently accepted women; they attended strike meetings in New York, "regularly," and with "a deep interest in the proceedings," according to one account. All the women at New York struck, and at Chicago, the entire female force, following behind their chief, quit too. But women seem not to have played a decisive role in the 1870 contest. See NYTr, Jan. 7 and 12, 1870; NYT, Jan. 6, 1870.

In 1907, women joined the men of the Commercial Telegraphers' Union and were, one journal reported, "spirited leaders. And perhaps this is because they have even more at stake than the men." Their grievances included the longstanding equal pay demand, a call for a wage hike, and improvements in conditions--among them, the low-wage, commission-paid branch office situations, some of which forced the women to work in unsavory places. If Pittsburgh is any indication, the women operators were active unionists in greater proportion than their presence in the labor force: they made up about 31% of the city's operators, but 42% of the union membership. See Charities and The Commons, Oct. 5, 1907, p. 864; Butler, Women and the Trades, pp. 292-294; Senate, 61st Congress, 2d Session, Senate Document 645, Report on Conditions of Women and Child Wage-Earners in the United States (Washington, 1911), Vol. X, p. 195.

[91]Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 384-385; NYH, Aug. 21, 1883; NYT, Aug. 18, 1883; BG, Aug. 18 and 19, 1883, see also Aug. 20, 1883; NYTr, Aug. 18, 19 and 21, 1883; NOP, Aug. 19, 1883; TA, Sept. 1, 1883; NYH, Aug. 19, 1883; NYT, Aug. 22 and 24, Sept. 7, 1883.

Whether blacklisted or squeezed out by a tight job market, the non-hires may not have been permanent victims. By October, the IW reported that the number of women out of work was about 15. A marriage notice three years later for Laura P. Schollenberger referred to her as "the only lady operator among the Philadelphia strikers" not rehired after the defeat. IW, Oct. 6, 1883; EA, Oct. 1, 1886.

[92]NYTr, July 20, 1883; NYH, July 28, 1883; 1880 Sample (60% of whom came from fatherless households); Daniel J. Walkowitz, Worker City, Company Town (Urbana, 1981), pp. 119, 174.

During the walkout, several reports noted that very few women applied for strike pay. Whether this had to do with demonstrating their independence, their material conditions, or (according to one account) a heavy rain that kept them away from the union hall, is not clear. See NYH,

Aug. 3, 1883; NYT, Aug. 1 and 2, 1883; NYTr, Aug. 3 and 14, 1883.

[93]Diner, Erin's Daughters, pp. 66, 99-100. For the militancy of young Irish women carpet mill workers in 1885, see Susan Levine, Labor's True Woman (Philadelphia, 1984), p. 92.

[94]NYH, July 20, 1883; NYT, July 23, 28, Aug. 24, 1883; Telegrapher, Apr. 24, 1875; Operator, Oct. 1, 1874; see also Telegrapher, Jan. 30, 1865 and Jan. 23, 1875; Reid, Telegraph in America (1879), pp. 170-171; EA, May 16, 1887; Operator, Sept. 15, 1874 and Apr. 15, 1876; JT, Dec. 15, 1870 and Jan. 15, 1872.

[95]On women's sphere, see Nancy F. Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood (New Haven, 1977); on domesticity, including the working-class variant, see Levine, Labor's True Woman, pp. 212, 132-133, 134-135, 141; and also Kealey and Palmer, Dreaming of What Might Be, p. 317; Gareth Stedman Jones, "Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870-1900," Journal of Social History, Summer 1974, pp. 486, 487; Robert Q. Gray, The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh (Oxford, 1976), p. 99; on cooperative values as typically part of a female upbringing, see Ryan, Womanhood in America, p. 149.

I should note that Hasia Diner's point about Irish women breaking out of middle-class female roles did not, as she shows, mean eschewing either domesticity or the idea of separate spheres. Erin's Daughters, Ch. 7 passim.

[96]Both Susan Levine and Kealey and Palmer note that the working-class domesticity that the Knights of Labor celebrated, while itself conservative, was also used as a basis for attacking industrial capitalism (which had begun eroding that domestic ideal). My argument on the women's noteworthy loyalty during the strike, which I arrived at independently of these scholars, nevertheless parallels and confirms their insights. See Dreaming of What Might Be, p. 317; and Labor's True Woman, pp. 121, 132-133, 134-135, 141.

On internal contradictions of domesticity, see also Cott, Bonds of Womanhood, pp. 197-206.

[97]They also sat apart in union meetings. NYT, July 20, 1883; NYTr, July 20, 1883; BG, July 24 and Aug. 15, 1883.

KID-GLOVED LABORERS:
GILDED AGE TELEGRAPHERS AND THE GREAT STRIKE OF 1883

A Dissertation Presented

By

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History

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C H A P T E R V

Kid-Gloved Laborers

Make no mistake: the operator who took part in the Great Strike was atypical. Most telegraphers in late 19th-century America shunned union membership. So did most Americans. What's more, most Americans earned their daily bread with plows or hammers, not pens or brass keys. And their bosses--for most Americans worked for someone else--were unlikely to be large corporate ones such as the Western Union. But it would be equally mistaken to conclude that the Brotherhood of Telegraphers and their 1883 struggle were simply ahead of their time, a historical fluke, a colorful episode of no more than antiquarian interest. They were not.

The operators, the Brotherhood, the strike, and the Western Union were very much part of the Gilded Age. The telegraphers and their fight had a significance well out of proportion to their numbers, something that their contemporaries in business, in the press, and in the labor movement well understood. The white-collared corporate employee was still unusual, but the much-discussed "labor question" was not. The union hall was exotic territory to the average American, but the terms "monopoly," "soulless corporation," and "the wages system"

were familiar enough.

The Brotherhood ties to the Knights of Labor were all the more important since the Knights were at the center of the worker and reform upsurge of the 1880s. Recent scholarship has challenged older interpretations that dismissed the Knights as a pack of myopic and anachronistic bumblers, and has argued instead that the Order represented a rich and diverse "subculture of opposition" to an ascendent corporate capitalism. At times radical, at times ambivalent, the Knights was an indigenous mass movement responding to the economic and social shocks of the era. In its best moments, it offered alternatives to a system resting on exploitation and greed.[1] The Brotherhood link with the Order influenced the Knights' subsequent growth, despite the operators' defeat. Between the Brotherhood and the Knights, and the contemporary labor movement as a whole, there were solidarity and hopefulness, but also tension, resentment, and division. To parse telegrapher unionism in the 1880s is to parse the America in which it grew and withered.

Collective action for self-help and protection by telegraphers predated the Brotherhood by almost 20 years. In the midst of the national bloodletting of the Civil War,

operators met in New York for three days in November, 1863, and created a National Telegraphic Union (NTU) to further their interests as a "profession." "National" is a key word here, for the war (and subsequent Reconstruction) had a markedly centralizing influence on the country. Three national labor unions had emerged in the 1850s, but 31 such organizations appeared during the 1860s and 70s.[2] Sectional conflict, the re-integration of a chastised South into the Union, and an increasingly powerful and activist federal government did much to make labor leaders think nationally. So did the shifting economic emphasis from local to national markets. And no industry better represented that crucial change in the 1860s than the telegraph--and no firm better than the Western Union.

On the whole, the NTU was a cautious outfit, very much in the mutual benefit society mold, providing its members with sickness and funeral payments. The Union set lofty and conservative goals for itself: "upholding and elevating the character and standing of our profession" (understandable enough, given the craft's "fast" reputation), "promoting and maintaining between ourselves and our employers just, equitable, and harmonious relations, and advancing the general interests of the fraternity" throughout the nation. But the fraternity did not include everyone in the telegraph office. At the 1865 convention, Delegate Merrill of Maine pointed out that it

would be in the NTU's interest to admit clerks and cashiers into the organization--to move, in effect, toward industrial unionism. J.J. Flanagan, representing Louisville, demurred, refusing to even dignify a clerkship with the word "profession." "A clerk has nothing to do with our business," he declared, "he is employed by the parties to keep books; and most every man can be a clerk, if he can write, read, and cipher a little; but you have to study some time, and practice much, to become a skillful operator." Not all skillful operators necessarily passed muster. A pro-woman membership motion at the same convention--introduced, let it be said, by J.J. Flanagan--went down to defeat.[3]

For the rest of its brief life, the NTU remained exclusive, timid, and aloof. It displayed no interest in the national labor congresses of the late 1860s that drew representatives from other unions. NTU President James G. Smith went so far as to say in 1864 that an operator's salary was a purely private, individual matter. Yet within a few years, a growing number of telegraphers found this constraint and rigidity less and less tenable as conditions within the industry began to change.[4]

For many operators, the change was for the worse. When the war boom slackened, so did the demand for operators. Increased message traffic of war and commerce had attracted new talent to the key. Telegraphy's "genteel" image and promise as a new and expanding industry (rather

like the current enthusiasm over "high tech") encouraged the influx of would-be operators. At the same time, the Western Union took on its "monopoly" configuration: absorbing smaller firms, and growing large, impersonal, and nationally powerful. Such paternalism as had existed in the smaller telegraph companies was fast declining.[5] So were the bankbook balances of many Knights of the Key. Around 1868 the Western Union began cutting salaries as corporate concentration proceeded, inaugurating the practice of filling vacancies at consecutively lower pay. The Golden Years of the early 60s were no more.[6]

All the while the NTU did nothing. Disgusted and eager for action, a number of New York City members, with the example of the locomotive engineers in mind, formed the Telegraphers' Protective League in September, 1868. By the following May the League's head, Grand Chief Operator Ralph Pope, claimed local branches ("Circuits") of the TPL in 11 large cities.[7]

Like the NTU, the TPL was exclusive, courting "all worthy operators" who worked the nation's wires. But there the similarity ended. The League was secret. It had to be, since its members worked for employers of unprecedented power. And until it achieved "sufficient strength to warrant protection to every member," it would remain secret. The TPL was no friendly society, either. "We do not propose to relieve the sick, nor bury the dead, but to place

the fraternity in a position where they will be able to take care of themselves," a clandestine recruiting circular explained. Most important, the League talked tough. There were no encomia to the shared interests of labor and capital, or, as at the 1864 NTU convention, gushing thanks to the country's telegraph managers "for the spirit of magnanimity and justice they have shown toward their employees." Telegraphic realities were different now, and the TPL coolly spelled them out. Strong organization by telegraphers was but an expression of "the same regard for self interest as [that of] other persons who control their own capital and their own labor." Organization would make operators "independent of the dictation of all telegraph companies," would counter the "whims and prejudices of magnates placed over us, many of whom are our inferiors in every respect," and enable the craft to "elevate ourselves from our present level." Being tough was not necessarily being radical. The League accepted, if grudgingly, the large-scale contours of telegraphy and the corporations that carried it out. But it refused to equate corporate employment with impotence. On the contrary, telegraphy's

> very peculiarities enhance our facilities for self protection; and while in its nature it must ever be controlled by a vast capital, its foundation rests in our hands. Each individual operator is a component part of the great system, without which the commercial interests of the country would be paralyzed, were our services

witheld for a single week.

There was much of the later "pure-and-simple" trade union outlook here: recognition of antagonistic class interests, organization to exert direct economic pressure to win concessions, and the absence of explicit long-term goals for social change.[8]

By 1870, the League felt strong enough to take on the Western Union. The incident touching off that year's strike involved a confusing shuffling of salary rates in San Francisco that left one operator, League Secretary L.N. Jacobs, $5 a month poorer and fighting mad. Company and union worked out a compromise, but the Western Union evidently reneged, firing Jacobs and another resister for good measure. After a second fruitless attempt to negotiate, the TPL backed up its San Francisco members and struck against the company on January 3, 1870.[9]

More underlay the walkout than the unhappiness of two West Coast operators and their $5 loss. The cumulative change as the corporation expanded--the growing sense among operators of estrangement from their employers, the degradation of their calling, and the diminution of their station--had turned many of them from the benign good fellowship of the NTU to the bristling activism of the TPL. Salary levels were sinking in the late 1860s as the pool of operator labor rose in alarmingly contrary motion. This was not the whole story, of course; as we have seen, deflation

could distort actual gains in income despite nominal reductions in pay.[10] But men and women act on perceptions of reality, and many telegraphers perceived "growing evils which now hover about us, and threaten dire disaster in the future," as the TPL's circular had it. And so operators coalesced around the League, and squared off against the great monopoly.[11]

For the Western Union's part, the paring of wages may have had to do with market forces. Though uncommonly powerful and growing ever more so, the company faced spurts of competition, which generally led to further consolidation, throughout the 1870s and 80s, and this could have dictated wage policies in the years leading up to the 1870 strike. A.C. Lewis, president of the Cincinnati TPL local, told the Enquirer that the corporation had "determined to make up the amount lost by the recent reduction of tariff [i.e., the rate customers paid to send a telegram] out of the operators' wages." Lewis was probably right. Average charges per message steadily declined through the late 1860s, and although average costs per message followed a roughly similar downward path in the same period, they bumped upward between 1869 and 1870, putting pressure on the company to make cuts somewhere--perhaps in salaries. Net corporate income likewise fell in the last two years of the 1860s, another sign that the tempo of salary reductions may have quickened as the decade drew to a close.[12]

On top of all this, by 1870 the Western Union must have been keen to extirpate the labor union that had infested its offices, and no one more keen than General Superintendent Thomas T. Eckert. One later account had Eckert offering to break the strike posthaste if his superiors would give him free rein. They presumably did, and the General applied his talents to the job at hand. Espionage--nothing new to a former Assistant Secretary of War--may have been part of his strategy. A copy of the League's "Confidential Circular" has survived in what were once the corporation's achives, very possibly because a stool pigeon within the union forwarded it to the management. It bears the ink superscript

> Respectfully referred to Hon Wm Orton President [of the Western Union] for his information.
>
> Tho^{S} T Eckert

that suggests that the General had an inside line on the TPL. Or, it may have been a war trophy, captured or surrendered after the strike. In any case, Eckert and the company triumphed over the League's insurgency that winter. Officially abandoned by the union on January 18, the walkout had actually failed after a week.[13]

League weakness as much as Western Union strength accounted for the quick collapse. While the union had organized nation-wide, there were still lots of operators and ex-operators, particularly during the slack winter

season, in need of work. Railroad operators, with their peculiar concerns, were another obstacle to unity. Worse still, as Vidkunn Ulriksson notes, were the union's weak finances and sloppy organization (perhaps that explains how a secret flyer came to rest on Superintendent Eckert's desk). Nor could the League find much support outside the craft. A few progressive trade unions offered money and resolutions, and at least one major newspaper, the New York Herald, scored the Western Union for its monopolistic arrogance. But they were unusual. There was little sympathy shown for employees thought to be paid well above the average worker, and who, more darkly, were part of a secret, coercive organization--"not, be it observed, an open and above-board trades' union or protective society," an indignant New York Times pointed out. The Telegraphers' Protective League was dead, and few Americans bothered to don black crepe.[14]

The Western Union meant to keep the League in its grave. Eckert tried, unsuccessfully, to silence the independent Telegrapher, followed the next year by his protege, District Superintendent David H. Bates, who banned the journal from the Philadelphia main office. The company also drew up an ironclad contract for employees who wished to return to a key, instituted a blacklist, and resumed its cutting of salaries. Although the TPL was smashed, not everyone despaired. Reviewing the year's

events in November 1870, Telegrapher editor J.N. Ashley spoke of the "comparative peace and quiet between the employes and the managers" after the dust of the strike had settled. Then, looking ahead, he brightened: "For some time to come at least there will probably be no organized or concerted action among telegraph employes, but as there is and has been for some time a scarcity of good telegraph operators, there is less necessity for this than heretofore." Ashley proved to be right about the first point; but about the second and third, distressingly wrong.[15]

For many operators the 1870s were a time of drift, fatalism, and the occasional chimera of salvation through competition among the telegraph companies. The industry itself was far from stagnant. The introduction of duplex and quadruplex systems multiplied the pace and quantity of the nation's message traffic remarkably. More than ever, the wire network both served and stimulated a continental market. And more than ever, one firm dominated that network. The Western Union not only survived a decade of severe depression but grew and generally prospered. Between 1870 and 1880 the company's roster of offices, wire mileage, and net income better than doubled, while

its share of messages handled increased over threefold. This was an impressive achievement indeed.[16]

From the telegraphers' point of view, that was precisely the problem. Western Union growth and vitality seemed locked into an economic formula whose logic inversely demanded the degradation of those who, with wrist and ear, created the company's wealth. The Western Union, it bears repeating, was not a true monopoly; to some degree it did have to weave and duck when competitors stirred.[17] But the cumulative and long-term trend was for such rivalry to lessen as the huge concern absorbed or disposed of challengers. At the same time, operators found the corporation an increasingly cold, intimidating, and unrewarding patron for whom to work. Unhappy telegraphers called the firm a nursery of tyrannies great and petty. An acid 1879 caricature of chief operators ascribed to them

> a strong tendency to cringe and fawn upon those who are a few steps higher up on the ladder, and a . . . brutal disregard for the rights and feelings of the unfortunates who are compelled to recognize them as superiors, though in reality they are such only in name.

The Telegrapher's correspondent in the Chicago main office reported in 1875 that the local management kept a running tally of the operators' "little errors, mistakes, etc." "in the little black book." Blacker still was the Western Union blacklist, a corporate fixture by the time of the

Great Strike (though probably much earlier). There was little tolerance for those whom the company found threatening. W.J. Johnston, a branch office manager in New York, devoted part of his energies to editing and publishing the Operator, an independent craft journal that, like Johnston, was conservative in tone. But not conservative enough for the Western Union. In late 1875, Superintendent A.S. Brown wrote Johnston that his journalism interfered with his telegraphic duties, and that he had to decide between the company and the Operator. Johnston chose the Operator. Eight years later, a month before the Great Strike, a Buffalo telegrapher described his city's new Western Union office as "one of the finest in the country," but added that the discipline in the place was "worthy [of] the Czar of all the Russias."[18]

Galling, too, were the various corporate "economies"--whether under the pressure of competition or to pay dividends on watered stock--that shaved company expense accounts and employee payroll accounts. Outright salary cuts accomplished this: recall the trauma of the 1876 "Sliding Scale," and the successive $5 or $10 reductions that accompanied the thump of each new arse settling into an old chair.[19] So did a merciless eye on shop-floor costs. No real-life manager matched Sir Botelle Porter's Pinaforesque boast that

Ingenious were the methods I did devise
To lessen my expenses and save the supplies.
They all wasted blanks at a terrible rate,
So I made 'em take their telegrams down on a
slate.

The company praised my economee,
And appointed me a super of the W.U.T.

but complaints about "the cutting down of supplies, both in quantity and quality," were far from whimsical.[20] Nor was there anything amusing about a personnel policy that lacked a uniform scale of grading and promotion, and that tolerated, perhaps even encouraged, the arbitrary and the irrational.[21] Speedups, through general "grinding" and, perhaps, through the technological imperatives of the duplex and quadruplex, made the 1870s grimmer still for many telegraphers.[22] When W.J. Johnston spoke in 1878 of "the antagonistic feeling at present" between operators and the Western Union, he expressed a craft-wide consensus. But removing the antagonism was not simply a matter of removing Jay Gould and Thomas Eckert. Neither, in fact, was entirely to blame for the operators' grief in the decade. Gould was not even connected with the company until his 1881 coup. (Ironically, when he set up his rival American Union Telegraph Company as part of his strategy to capture the Western Union, operators welcomed the prospect of a competitive jolt to the industry's giant.) Eckert, though anathema to many telegraphers for his performance in 1870, left the firm in 1875 after

long-standing tension between him and President William Orton broke into an open feud. He would return in triumph, as Gould's man, but not for six years. In short, the great wire monopoly had earned the loathing of so many of its employees by the late 1870s quite independently of any one manager or director.[23]

Loathing did not automatically mean resistance and rebellion. By and large, operators of the 1870s quit the craft or suffered in silence; they did not band together to fight back as they had at the beginning of the decade. Hard times helped to cow them, no doubt, as did the sheer power of the Western Union, and the depressing prospect of a poor labor market impoverished further as a swarm of farmboys and shopgirls, with their rudimentary Morse, descended on telegraph offices. High operator turnover, the fickleness of youth, and a white-collar disdain for anything that smacked of the union hall hindered collective action as well.

This somnolence was not universal. Barely a year after the TPL debacle, W.W. Burhans, a veteran of the League's fight with the Western Union (which won him a place on its new blacklist), called on his fellows to once again organize. "Why, to-day," he wrote, "we telegraphers stand alone, as the one class of workingmen of the world's numerous branches of industries and callings, that are making no effort to protect our labor or elevate our

profession." Airing grievances through a journal such as the Telegrapher was fine, Burhans said, but no substitute for a union.[24] The Telegrapher cautiously agreed. J.N. Ashley assured his readers that he had no use for "communists or agrarians" and saw no inherent "antagonism between labor and capital," but he did accept the need for a union--and one that might, as a last resort, legitimately defends its rights with a strike.[25] These exhortations must have had some effect. In the fall of 1872, the Western Union's Journal of the Telegraph printed the constitutional preamble of a "Telegraphers' Association" formed earlier in the year. Although the Association declared itself "earnestly" opposed to strikes, the Western Union would have none of it, and the Journal warned operators to avoid the union. Most evidently did, for the organization soon dropped from sight.[26] But the longing for an operators' union persisted as long as corporate depredations did. When news of the impending Sliding Scale wage cuts broke in late 1875, discontented voices again talked about collective action. Combining self-interest, republicanism, and topicality, a Washington, D.C. telegrapher reflected that

> the coming year of 1876, the one hundredth birthday of our independence as a nation, would be a most fitting and appropriate time for an organization expressive of our independence as a fraternity.

Others gathered to meet in protest of the salary reductions. But early the next year the proposed Sliding Scale duly went into effect. The proposals for a union to counter it did not.[27]

Quiescence and conservatism among the telegraphers was in any case more typical. "Alcatraz," a San Francisco operator, wrote dejectedly in 1871 of the apathy and selfish individualism that undermined the commonweal of his West Coast colleagues. W.J. Johnston strained to find reason for optimism wherever he could, or, failing that, counseled his readers to endure. "There is no remedy that we can see at present to arrest the downward course of salaries;" he confessed in 1875, "so, Micawber-like, we must wait for something to turn up, or for a return of good times." Six months later, when the Sliding Scale left the craft stunned, Johnston advised operators to submit gracefully--and not for a moment entertain the folly of striking for redress. Besides, he added, things could be worse; other corporations had made even deeper wage cuts. Telegraphers in the nation's capital heeded his words. "The men took it very quietly," a local operator reported. "No one thought of such nonsense as a strike, which would be a grievous error, but on all sides is heard the resolution to leave the business as soon as possible."[28] Johnston later even reminded his readers not to let their narrow self-interest obscure the broader

picture. After all, Western Union stockholders had rights, too:

> We should bear in mind, always, that many of the shareholders are not any richer than the average operator, and less capable of reviving a broken fortune. Many of them are helpless widows and orphans, seamstresses and day laborers who have their little hoard invested, and they look for dividend day just as anxiously as we do for the "first" or the "fifteenth," with all that that implies. If the dividend fails them, they are as much embarrassed as we would be if the company "passed" our salaries once in a while.

This sort of understanding was remarkable, indeed saintly, from one whom the Western Union had hounded out of a job only a few years before. The Journal of the Telegraph could have hardly put it better. Yet Johnston was no corporate hack, and he was doubtless quite sincere, and quite in character, when he hopefully welcomed the ascension of Norvin Green to the company's presidency in 1878 as an opportunity "to promote a better feeling between the operators and officers" of the great concern. Doctor Green, less inclined to an equanimous view of things, would soon disappoint the conservative editor.[29]

In gauging the response of telegraphers to their occupational decline in the 1870s, we need to look beyond editorial jeremiads, union organization, and indignation

meetings to something far more elusive and diffuse, but perhaps far more typical: informal resistance and struggle. Recent scholarship suggests that workers in various settings, through understandings among themselves as to what constituted a fair day's work, sought to maintain their autonomy and self-respect in spite of employer and managerial pressure to produce more and more quickly. The craftsman's "stint" marked off his notion of a reasonable amount of work and a comfortable time in which to do it. His "manly" bearing signified a refusal to let dependent status as a wage earner erode his fundamental equality, as a republican citizen, with his wealthier boss. Thus, a worker met the foreman's officious stare by stopping work, putting down his tool, folding his arms, glaring back, and refusing to continue until his shop space was once again his own. When the compulsive managerial pioneer Frederick W. Taylor set out in the 1880s to shatter the informal quotas that machinists had set for themselves, "ingenious accidents were planned," he later testified, "and these happened to machines in different parts of the shop, and were, of course, always laid to the fool foreman [Taylor] who was driving the men and the machines beyond their proper limit."[30] Informal resistance could be more oblique, as in the case of workers who struck with their feet. Jonathan Prude has found textile mill operatives in antebellum New England

who, when conditions favored them, used the threat of picking up and finding a more congenial position to bolster their market power. Likewise, the famous high wages of the Ford Motor Company reflected high turnover as much as high productivity.[31]

Telegraphers may have adopted the same kinds of defenses. The evidence is sketchy, and the Knights and Ladies of the Key in any event were always sui generis, but the possibility is worth a brief exploration.

Unlike, say, coopers or smiths, operators were not artisans with a long-standing (if not unchanging) craft tradition created within the small shop. The wire and railroad corporations had created telegraphers as an occupation in a way that they had not created the carpenters or machinists that they employed. Yet operators could still have developed notions of fair work loads and conditions as had other and older crafts. If Norvin Green can be believed, stints among operators existed on the eve of the Great Strike. "Ever since the brotherhood was organized," he told a reporter after defeating the union, "the operators were formulating their demands, and too many concessions were already given them. I do not refer to open demands, but silent understandings, as, for instance, a certain number of dispatches or a certain amount of presswork was to constitute a day's work. No such rules were posted, but they grew up. That will be

effectually done away with now."[32]

Where telegraphers could not restrict their output, they might thwart corporate encroachments by botching the traffic they were compelled to handle. Noting the incidence of mistakes in messages along Western Union lines in 1874, the Journal of the Telegraph testily declared:

> Errors, for which the Company is sometimes sued, and operators dishonored, we more than half suspect are not always errors. By their very peculiarity they seem to us, as we occasionally study them, more of the nature of crimes, either against the Company or companions in labor, and from which both suffer. The suspicion may be false. We cannot help that. What we do know is that the power of operators to annoy and destroy is vast and fearful.

Telegraphers almost certainly used such sabotage as a form of subterranean struggle with the Western Union, but how extensive it was, and how much the peculiarities of the job helped or hurt this sort of resistance are less clear. Craft pride, after all, rested on speed and accuracy. A machinist, to take a familiar example, could both be a first-rate craftsman (in his own and his shopmates' eyes) and frustrate his employer by slow and methodical work; a first-class telegrapher really could not. That very pride in fast and letter-perfect sending and receiving caused tension between operators--the "petty spites between men working together" that Brotherhood Secretary Thomas Hughes pledged his organization would end by encouraging the operator elite to have more consideration

for their less-skilled fellows. Telegraphy, too, was a high-pressure calling, all the more so after the duplex and quadruplex innovations of the mid-70s. Complaints about mistakes must have reflected sheer overwork as well as covert resistance.[33]

The possibility that telegraphers used mobility from office to office as a kind of informal struggle demands an equally cautious reading. Like stints and sabotage, it surely existed. The managerial despotism that plagued the City (or Women's) Department of the Western Union's New York headquarters in 1870 elicited the militant declaration of "Tina," one of its force, that "however much the walls of 'N' office may be gilded, our plucky American girls won't stay there long unless 'Our manager' ceases to insult and trample on them, and discharge them at a moment's notice, for the most trifling infringements of her ridiculous rules." And telegraphers were on the move; but this seems to have worked against as much as for them, since the infamous successive-reduction scheme, if not caused by high operator turnover, did exploit it. The marked turnover of operators, as noted earlier, grew in part out of the youth of many at the keys and the peculiar configuration of the national rail and wire network. Job dissatisfaction and high pressure doubtless quickened the flow. In a sense, getting out of telegraphy altogether was a form of resistance, too.

But conscious and systematic attempts to regulate the telegraphic labor market were confined to union or company.[34]

Near the end of the 1870s, telegraphers again began thinking about more orthodox forms of self-defense. A letter to the editor of the Operator in mid-1879 from "Radical" spoke bitterly of corporate oppression and wasted careers, and then drew what seemed to him the obvious conclusion: Organize. "It depends entirely upon ourselves," agreed a second operator a month later, "whether we receive porters' compensation or the compensation due to the responsible positions we occupy." The mood spread. "'In union there is strength,'" another telegrapher lectured his colleagues the following spring. "Act on this motto, or forever stop whining about hard times."[35]

They did start to act. By 1881, several groups had formed around the nation. The Telegraphers' Mutual Union (later renamed Telegraphers' Union) claimed 150 members in the New York metropolitan area that summer, while a Brotherhood of Telegraphers (as yet unconnected with the Knights of Labor), hailing from Chicago, boasted an equally large constituency. Both groups' avowed aims were self-protection for the craft through conservative means--strikes, for example, were explicitly rejected by the New York

group, and very likely by the Chicago Brotherhood as well.[36] But militancy was in the air. In midsummer 1882, operators at the Denver Western Union office, disgusted by general conditions and especially by the policies of Assistant District Superintendent Bennett R. Bates (brother of David H. Bates), struck for a $10 raise and other demands. The strike failed, but it at once focused and stimulated a growing sense of self-empowerment and solidarity within the craft. No union had sanctioned the walkout, but the Knights of Labor-affiliated United Telegraphers of North America, based in Pittsburgh, expressed sympathy with the action and asked its members not to scab on the Denver men.[37]

The talk now was of organization and resistance on a national level. Jay Gould's 1881 takeover of the Western Union, moving the corporation closer to being a true national monopoly and a worse nemesis of operators than ever, whetted the mounting appetite among telegraphers for a national trade union. Nowhere was the new hunger for activism more evident than the editorial page of the Operator, where W.J. Johnston--who only four years before had been patiently defending the widow and orphan stockholders of the Western Union--mused in 1881:

> Operators are apt scholars, and a little consolidation of their own might not be altogether a drawback. Telegraph organizers [i.e., entrepreneurs] are men with an exceedingly keen eye for the almighty dollar, while telegraph

> operators may be defined as a class of men disorganized and helpless; and, if "consolidation" is such a fine thing for the former, there can be no harm in the latter indulging in a little of it too.

Nor was it just a matter of organization: "the right to strike is one that operators undeniably possess, in common with all other workers," Johnston wrote months later.[38]

At about the same time, workers outside of telegraphy were thinking about combining for protection and elevation, too. What had begun in 1869 as a secretive cell of nine Philadelphia garment cutters was, by 1882, a growing nation-wide labor and reform movement which welcomed unskilled day laborer as well as aristocratic craftsman, black as well as white, woman as well as man, brain worker as well as hand worker--to unite, in short, all wage workers in common cause. "The solidarity of labor," wrote Norman Ware, "was fast becoming an economic reality if not a psychological fact, and it was the business of the Order to make the organization of labor fit the conditions of work."[39] That Order--the Knights of Labor--promised to meld the economic self-interest of working-class America with the broader vision of transforming a competitive, acquisitive, and exploitative society into a cooperative commonwealth. And the Knights membership, although fluid, was clearly increasing. Singly, in pairs, or as entire union locals, wage earners trooped into the expanding Order. The general economic upturn after the

depression of the 1870s no doubt encouraged workers to organize, as did a growing resentment of the "soulless corporations" that were remaking the Republic in ominous ways. Labor was on the move.[40]

The new interest in telegrapher unionism, then, coincided with a general labor renaissance. The Pittsburgh chapter of the United Telegraphers of America, which John Campbell and Thomas Hughes had organized in March 1881, was the first operators' group to join the Knights. Along with its associated chapters in other cities, the UTA formed one wing of telegrapher activism, while the rival Chicago-based Brotherhood, with no ties to the Knights, made up the other. By early 1882, both were talking about a single national union to match the power of the Western Union. But more than geographical distance separated the Pittsburgh and Chicago groups. The Windy City operators found the rhetoric of the UTA uncomfortably radical in tone. A Brotherhood member explained that the phrase "securing to ourselves of a proper share of the wealth we create" was "unmistakably a communistic formula of expression," and one that the Chicago men feared would endanger their own organization's goal of a "full, amicable and harmonious settlement of relations with our employers." Nor were they happy when the UTA spoke of seeking "more of the leisure which rightfully belongs to us, so that we may have more time for social enjoyment"; that, a Brotherhood

correspondent sniffed, "would probably lead to a misinterpretation of our highest purposes."[41] With apparently irreconcilable differences but a common desire to weld a national operators' union in their own images, the two camps issued calls for founding conventions, which duly took place--within five days of each other--in March 1882.[42]

Between the conventions and the following summer, much reconsideration, consultation, and horse-trading must have taken place. Perhaps, too, Pittsburgh and Chicago were not the polar opposites that they had seemed. Exactly what went on between the two factions is unclear, but their differences had narrowed (or the desire for a single national union had broadened) enough for them to unite, very likely in the summer of 1882. The new union bowed to UTA precedent by linking itself with the Knights of Labor, as District Assembly 45. No doubt as part of the give-and-take of the merger negotiations, the union was to bear the name Brotherhood of Telegraphers of the United States and Canada. It adopted a motto, too: Alterum Alterius Auxilio Eget (roughly, "One Needs the Help of Another").[43]

The officers and organizers of DA 45 quickly got busy: recruiting along the national web of telegraph and railway lines, devising a "wire test" (a kind of telegraphic password) and a set of ciphers to conduct union business safe from corporate eyes, convening a national

conclave, and hammering together a platform of principles and goals. The results of the organizing drive were impressive. Two days after Christmas, 1882, the Brotherhood's chief executive, District Master Workman John Campbell, reported that DA 45 now comprised almost 5000 Brothers and Sisters--600 in New York, 150 in Boston, in Baltimore 125, 110 at Quebec, 100 at Chattanooga, Kansas City, 40, 25 at Milwaukee, the same at Omaha, 35 at Mauch Chunk, and on it went. By May 1883, Campbell claimed 120 Local Assemblies (LAs) within his District, with some 8,198 members. There were hitches, to be sure. In some areas willing railroad operators remained outside the Brotherhood simply for want of an organizer to properly initiate them. But the growth of the union was generally steady and encouraging.[44]

Brotherhood supporters discerned an unprecedented feeling of hopefulness and self-respect abroad among the craft. The new union, a Philadelphia correspondent to the Telegraphers' Advocate reported in June 1883, had "brought about a better feeling among the men than ever existed here before. It has paid sick benefits or supplied 'subs,' for quite a number of its unfortunate members; buried one member; settled many disputes; frowned down petty jealousies; united the commercial and railroad operators; and," he concluded, "in fact has been the means of more general good for the operators of this section than anything ever before

started in our midst."[45] Not all were so appreciative. Two members of the Baltimore LA, Adrian Grape and George E. Dunning, had not only fallen six months behind in dues, but after suffering suspension for it, they turned on their late co-unionists and threatened to furnish the Western Union with privileged information about the Brotherhood. They were duly expelled.[46] But they were not the only errant telegraphers plaguing the Brotherhood that summer. By June 1883, enough members were demanding withdrawal cards from the union to move John Campbell to issue an angry warning about this flurry of desertions. And it all had to do with a pending bill of grievances.[47]

Promoting good fellowship and elevation of the craft had been important aims and achievements of the nascent Brotherhood, but a fundamental cause of the telegraphers' ills--the policies and power of the Western Union--remained. Dealing with the great monopoly had been on DA 45's agenda from its first national meeting in October 1882, when delegates drafted a bill of grievances for membership ratification. The Brothers and Sisters approved the bill in May of 1883, and this set of demands, in a revised form, the union finally presented to the telegraph companies in July. Its rejection precipitated the Great Strike.[48]

The Western Union's decision to resist and break the Brotherhood revolved around the matter of recognition.

"It is plain," the business journal Bradstreet's noted during the walkout, "that the real issue between the striking telegraphers and the Western Union and Baltimore & Ohio companies is the recognition or non-recognition of the Brotherhood." It was plain to Norvin Green, who frankly told a Senate inquiry that his company's recognition of the union would have had "fatal" consequences. Doctor Green knew a fatal infection when he saw one.[49]

Consequently, the Western Union determined to ignore the Brotherhood's pretensions to legitimately represent its employees and set out to kill the union. A Philadelphia-based operator told a reporter that the company had begun distributing forms to employees "asking them if they were satisfied with their pay and hours of work, and questions of like nature," in order to ferret out the Brotherhood troublemakers. This may well have caused timid operators to hesitate to join, or even to withdraw from, the union. Perhaps the "cowardly and treasonable" renegades that had alarmed John Campbell in June were responding to increased Western Union intimidation.[50] The Brotherhood, in turn, bolstered loyal members, expelled or disciplined less worthy adherents, continued to recruit, and, for cowed or wavering operators, cobbled up this oath:[51]

> I, the undersigned, recognizing the necessity for telegraphic organization, but not wishing at present to become actively identified therewith, do hereby express my sympathy with,

> and voluntarily pledge myself to refrain from in any way interfering with any movement that may be instituted by the Brotherhood of Telegraphers of the United States and Canada, for the advancement and elevation of the fraternity.

Thus fortified, DA 45 presented its bill of grievances to the Western Union and its lesser competitors, expecting at best a compromise settlement of some kind, and at worst a sharp but short strike. Enthusiasm for a contest with the great monopoly varied. Operators in the New Orleans Western Union office told the Picayune that they had no serious complaints about their situation, "save the matter of Sunday work." But, they added, as good union members, they would respect the majority decision and join any strike. On July 19, 1883, they and perhaps 8-10,000 other telegraphers honored their pledges of solidarity and quit their keys.[52]

After a month of hard fighting, the Great Strike in which they took part failed, and the Brotherhood yielded to the Western Union. I have already recounted the events of those four weeks in some detail and they need not detain us here.[53] My concern now is the strike's aftermath and its consequences for telegrapher unionism and the labor movement as a whole.

The Western Union lost no time in cleansing its lines of the Brotherhood. As in 1870, operators wishing to regain their desks had to sign an ironclad oath. Prominent unionists received no such grace; the company simply blacklisted them. At work, some former strikers suffered managerial harrassment. General Eckert's second victory over operator insurgency seemed every bit as total as his first.[54]

But not quite. While the Brotherhood was smashed and humiliated, things were not exactly the same in the operating room. The hours of work and the terms on which operators performed extra and Sunday duty were evidently altered so that there was an improvement, of sorts, for commercial telegraphers. "We struck for better pay and better hours, and have got something of both," one operator claimed four months after the defeat.[55]

Such modest improvements no doubt helped to ease the lot of operators as individuals, although it is not clear how extensive the effect of the concessions were nor how long they remained in effect. But they could in no case repair the mistrust, rancor, and disillusionment that the strike's failure had created within the labor movement. The brief life and death of the Brotherhood of Telegraphers had been the first nation-wide action by a Knights of Labor affiliate. Both operators and Knights were stung by the debacle, and both now traded insults, accusations, and indictments over the lost cause.

The telegraphers shot first. As early as August 11, a Boston operator, noting the dearth of financial support that he believed the Knights leadership had promised the Brotherhood, wearily concluded that the Order had "gone back on us." Six days later, with the fight all but officially conceded, the New York Times found the Knights "openly denounced" by local Brotherhood officers. With the strike's formal end, anti-Knights vituperation became a commonplace wherever telegraphers gathered. Another dispatch from New York reported operators and linemen milling around 195 Broadway muttering "many harsh things" about the Order. Union partisans impatiently brushed aside suggestions that the Brotherhood's tactics shared some blame for the collapse. It was not the failure to call out press and railroad operators that lost the strike, Brotherhood Executive Board Chairman Eugene O'Connor explained. No; Knights officers "who either were lax in their duty or else did not realize our critical position" had bungled the strike. As condemnations of the Order went that August, O'Connor's was restrained.[56]

Promises and money were the immediate source of the telegraphers' wrath. John Campbell later asserted that the Knights General Executive Committee, meeting with the Brotherhood's own Executive Committee at a New York hotel four days before the walkout, had given the operators "every assurance" that "in the event of a long strike the

Brotherhood would receive the heartiest support, moral and financial, from the Knights of Labor. Although there was nothing in the general laws of the Knights of Labor that would warrant the levying of assessments," Campbell conceded, "it was mutually understood that if necessary an extraordinary appeal would be made to the whole order for financial aid." That appeal was sent, but only after the Brotherhood's position had irreparably deteriorated. Worse, the man responsible for the delay was John S. McClelland, secretary of the Knights General Executive Board, and also a telegrapher and Brotherhood member. Local Knights and labor unions had done their best to aid the operators, but the failure of the Knights leadership to coordinate a national strike-fund drive--and especially the failure of McClelland to act--had defeated the Brotherhood as much as the Western Union had. Or so went the telegraphers' argument.[57]

The Knights' version of the story differed markedly. The telegraphers, McClelland countered, had been overconfident, had acted rashly, had informed the parent organization of their plans at the last minute, and had only requested financial aid if the strike were to be a prolonged one. What's more, McClelland pointed out (as did other Knights defenders at the time), the Order had no legal right to levy strike fund assessments on the general membership; the Brotherhood's expectations of such support had

been as groundless as its boasts of adequate resources. In his memoirs, ex-Grand Master Workman Terence V. Powderly recalled the strikers' youth, brashness, inexperience, and superficial grasp of the ways and goals of the Knights. They had surprised him with their ill-conceived decision to strike and assured him of victory within 48 hours. He, in turn, had urged them to call off the strike and take on the telegraph companies when their organization, funds, and the timing were favorable. The Brotherhood, Powderly thus concluded, had only itself to blame for the catastrophe of 1883.[58]

Who was right? The Knights seem to have had the better case. Clearly, the Brotherhood was a green union. Its leaders were impetuous and, given the task they faced, reckless. Samuel Gompers, who certainly knew his way around a picket line, explained to Senator James Z. George of Mississippi after the defeat that

> This strike has another instructive feature. It will teach the telegraphers this, that if they are desirous of holding out for a long period and fighting a concern of the magnitude of the Western Union Telegraph Company they will have in time of peace to prepare for war.
>
> George: They will have to have a treasury, you mean?
>
> Gompers: They will have to have a treasury.

P.J. McGuire, another seasoned trade unionist sympathetic to the Brotherhood's cause, called the operators "impulsive

and quick," and chided them for having gone into the contest with virtually empty pockets.[59]

It is also true (as even Campbell later admitted) that the Knights could not constitutionally order members to support a strike, although it is unclear whether the operators expected the Knights appeal to be mandatory. The call for voluntary aid did finally go out in late July, and the Knights General Assembly evidently gave the operators $2,000 beyond the $1,640.65 that the appeal drew. Order leaders such as Powderly doubtless took the matter of voluntary succor for the operators seriously. "Do all you can to aid the Telegraphers," the Grand Master Workman wrote a St. Louis Knight the day after the collapse.[60] All the principals in the affair later publicly defended their actions, and their accounts--none more than Powderly's--were self-serving. Such testimony invites skepticism. But letters written during the strike survive, and they also suggest a Brotherhood both ill-prepared and less than enthusiastic about sharing its plans with the Knights national leadership until the last minute. On July 10, Assistant Grand Secretary Gilbert Rockwood told Powderly that although the Brotherhood leadership had been huddling in New York for a week, he still had no idea what the telegraphers were up to. In the middle of the strike, Powderly wrote Grand Secretary Robert Layton of the private fears that contrasted with his

public confidence about the campaign: "I am sorry that they didn't acquaint us of their intentions before they went out, it would have given us a better opportunity of getting ready to assist them." Campbell's telegram of capitulation on August 17 bore little surprise for Layton. "It's all over and our prediction as to its ultimate end has been verified," he wrote Powderly the next day. "No time for regrets. Lets up and at them."[61] The Knights, truth to tell, were not blameless. John McClelland seems to have been both callous and arrogant about helping the defeated operators with Knights funds.[62] The Order's configuration was also at fault. The strike's failure raised questions about the general strike policies and organizational structure of the Knights.[63]

Rancor and mutual recrimination over the lost strike would last at least three years, but the Brotherhood renounced its affiliation with the Knights of Labor within three months. Operator disgust with the Order was pervasive, though not unanimous. From Washington, D.C., telegrapher and Knights loyalist Robert L. De Akers wrote Powderly of the "knaves" and "fools" among the craft trying to turn operators against the Order through "Misrepresentation and calumny," and spoke of the need to oppose such "evil influences" "so that the telegraphers may be saved from their enemies--and themselves."[64] But most operators were inclined to dump the Knights and go it alone.

From now on, the Operator's Johnston warned, avoid the "sanguine agitator" and act on your own. "There is no bond of sympathy between the various unions," a St. Louis Brotherhood officer glumly concluded, "which will not snap under the strain of a very light weekly assessment made upon non-strikers for the benefit of strikers."[65]

After the Brotherhood divorce from the Knights of Labor, telegrapher unionism led a shadowy and marginal existence. Hints of reorganization and resurgence persisted for more than a year after the Great Strike. In early 1884, labor journalist John Swinton reported that a telegraph manager had smugly told him that the operators were thoroughly demoralized and incapable of action. "Well," Swinton winked at his readers, "let them think so." By the spring Swinton's had operators "quietly organizing throughout the country," adding that the linemen had persevered despite the Western Union victory and were still organized. Came summer, the paper quoted one telegrapher promising an offensive by a rejuvenated Brotherhood that would catch the company at its most vulnerable--during the presidential convention in Chicago. While the assault never came off, talk of operators organizing and biding their time continued through 1885.[66] There was good reason

for an embryonic operators' union to bide its time. Operator unions, a Chicago Knight of the Key explained, were actually very much like telegraph companies:[67]

> When they [telegraph companies] are young and weak, they are very good to their employes . . . but as soon as they begin to get a little power they commence to put on the thumbscrews. In like manner, the operators' organization should be "good Indian" while it is young, and when its teeth were cut it would then be time enough for it to try to bite.

With or without unions, militancy on the circuits did not entirely vanish. In 1885, indignation over the Western Union's refusal to restore extra pay for overtime set off a scattering of strikes, protest meetings, and threats of walkouts--possibly inspired by the Knights of Labor's successful bout with Jay Gould's Midwestern rail empire that spring--that, at least at Chicago, restored the overtime.[68] Whether any sub rosa union was involved in this spurt of rebellion is impossible to say. Perhaps there was, since by 1885 a new organization, the Telegraphers' Union of America, was proclaiming itself heir to the old Brotherhood. Its chief, Edinburgh-bred Tom O'Reilly, was both a Knights activist and a veteran of the 1883 campaign. His union, of necessity still a secret organization, had begun in January 1885 and held its first convention that summer in Chicago. The TUA's general health, O'Reilly declared the same year, was "very encouraging and highly satisfactory."[69]

O'Reilly's optimism proved sufficient, by 1886, for the TUA to formally rejoin the Knights of Labor and once more bear the name District Assembly 45, Brotherhood of Telegraphers of the United States and Canada. "We rejoice over the fact," John Swinton beamed, predicting that the reaffiliation would strengthen both the craft and the Knights as a whole. Electric Age editor John B. Taltavall was likewise pleased, calling the alliance "the master stroke in organizing the entire telegraphic fraternity." For those with unpleasant memories of 1883, Taltavall stressed the federal nature of the Order, and for those who feared that Knights membership meant that "Mr. Powderly will be our ruler," he assured them that he would indeed not "while Mr. O'Reilly has the rein of government." Almost exactly three years after the Great Strike, the reborn Brotherhood claimed 3000 adherents and some 30 Local Assemblies--such as the one in Brooklyn, where, the Age reported, the first meeting's initiates included "a fair sprinkling of lady operators." The New York linemen too, following their old leader James E. Smith, were again under the Knights' aegis. Determined to avoid the mistakes of the earlier movement, the Brotherhood offered a fraternal hand to trackside operators, declaring the interests of commercial and railroad telegraphers "identical." The perennial talk of elevating the craft now seemed less a cliche than a probability. "Those who set to work with

thorough good will," proclaimed an 1887 Brotherhood circular, "seldom fail."[70]

Good will proved inadequate to underwrite a new national operators' guild. In rough parallel with the eclipse of the Knights of Labor, DA 45 decayed and disappeared, probably in the late 1880s or early 1890s. Perhaps the brief enthusiasm and subsequent neglect that the revived Brotherhood suffered were linked to the Order's fortunes; the Knights' acme, 1885-87, was also the period in which the second Brotherhood came and went. The peculiar circumstances of the telegraph industry were at work, too. Even as the Knights bested Gould in the railway strikes and attracted hundreds of thousands of new members, the Brotherhood remained secret, wary, and weak. If the Western Union was vulnerable as it entered into its last serious stretch of competition with the B & O and others in the mid-80s, it was still formidable enough to make operators think twice before signing union cards. And so, together with stories of discontent and clandestine organizing among the craft were signs of demoralization and stagnation. Reporting a 20% wage cut and layoffs for Western Union employees in Louisville in 1884, a frustrated John Swinton snapped, "What is the matter with this trade? Do they have to be weak-kneed because their first effort at freedom proved a failure?" An unfavorable labor market helped to keep telegraphers docile, no doubt, with

the memory of an abundant reserve of strikebreakers fresh in the minds of many operators.[71] After the excitement and expectation over the second Brotherhood peaked and receded, prognoses for the craft turned uniformly pessimistic. The operators' world of the 1880s began to sound like that of the 1870s: too many operators and too few keys, no mobility, low pay, and the inescapable tyranny of the Western Union. Complaints of operator apathy in the face of degradation became editorial page habitues. The typical operator hit by a salary cut, said the Electric Age,

> lets off his steam of indignation against the companies, upbraids his associates because they are not in a position to resist . . . and overlooks the fact that reductions are possible only because of his indifference.

Indifference and conservatism went together. "When radical remedies are proposed," a telegraphic Single Taxer pointed out, "the timid crowd shrinks back into slavery, stricken with terror by the sacrilege." Such chronic inaction, warned a Chicago operator in 1887, was sure to nourish fatalism among the craft to the point where "our grievances will become part of our nature, and be accepted as a necessity by many."[72] Some, as in the 1870s, lamely suggested that operators use their journals to air grievances and expose wrongdoing. But that, compared with the likes of the Great Strike, was pretty mild stuff.[73] Strictly speaking, operator unionism in the 19th century

did not disappear with the second Brotherhood's passing. During the 1890s, an Order of Commercial Telegraphers and an Order of Railway Telegraphers limped their separate and ineffectual ways through the decade. Not until 1907 would another national operators' union coalesce to make war on the Western Union.[74] But the confluence of organizational vitality, interest in making common cause with other victims of the "wages system," and excitement in asking bold questions about the status quo belonged uniquely to the Brotherhood of 1883 and its Great Strike. Never again would whether and how telegraph operators joined the labor movement embrace so much of importance.

So significant an apparition as the Brotherhood demands a closer look. If it reveals so much about its time and place, we should ask what it was all about. Superficially, its quick growth and quick collapse rested on pent-up grievances, youthful ardor, raw leadership, meager funds, and a powerful foe. True enough. But what of deeper strengths and weaknesses? What were the parts--cultural, ideological, and human--which the Brotherhood comprised as a whole? And what sort of whole was it?

To begin, the Brotherhood expressed the collective identification of telegraph operators with their occupation. If not necessarily class-conscious, the Brothers and Sisters of DA 45 were at least telegrapher-conscious. Since the organization accepted clerks and linemen too, it was not actually a craft union. This is important, and I will return to it. But the Brotherhood was primarily an operators' union, both in emphasis and membership. Its very name betrayed the predominant interests within the organization of those who spoke Morse for a living.[75]

The Brotherhood was also an expression of craft pride. By forming a union, operators announced their occupational self-respect. I say "craft" (as did many telegraphers) although the word, with its connotations of the artisanal workshop, is really inadequate to describe the world of the operators. Socially part of a new and fluid lower-middle class, they were unprecedented. So was their calling. Nothing comparable to telegraphy existed before the mid-19th century. The industrial revolution had created telegraph operators, as an occupation, ex nihilo; it was up to the operators themselves to likewise create a sense of craft (or profession) from scratch. Telegraphy had a workaday craft culture, of course: the individual operators' "signatures," the regular partnerships over the wire, the special

terminology, the hazing of "freshmen," and all the rest. But this was not a "professional" culture in the way that the old free professions possessed well-defined and fenced-off fields of practice.[76] A certain repertoire of skills marked a telegraph operator, but ideally, a Brotherhood circular argued, so should "knowledge and moral worth." Both in and out of unions, those concerned with the sinking status of the craft frequently spoke of the need to "elevate" telegraphy. Part of this had to do with the reputation of the "fast" young Knights of the Key who criss-crossed the nation leaving the telegraph offices behind them suffused with a vague whiff of nicotine and alcohol. Organizing, a Chicagoan pointed out in 1884, would raise the general tone of the occupation "so that it would once more be an honor to be known as an operator, instead of, as now, almost a disgrace." And partly, the talk about "elevation" reflected a less than generous urge to set telegraphy off as not only respectable, but more respectable than some other callings--the occupational counterpart of the lower-middle class striving for "gentility." W.J. Johnston told Operator readers that organizing to police the indiscriminate access to the craft that was degrading them would protect their salaries, "purify the profession, and lift it above the level of the common store clerk."[77]

Quantity as much as quality determined the overall

health of the craft, though, and the Brotherhood accordingly embodied the long-standing desire of operators to tame the telegraphic labor market. By sharpening and tightening the terms of apprenticeship--indeed, by even establishing a uniform system of formal apprenticeship--Brotherhood activists hoped to reverse their occupation's decline. Fewer and better operators, sifted and refined through guild-like regulations, would raise the market power, income, and status of telegraphers.

The Gilded Age labor market had been generally unkind to operators, and the peculiarities of demography and the telegraph industry made a bad situation worse. High turnover, seasonal fluctuations and the "waiting list," and above all, too many men and women calling themselves telegraphers, had depressed the level of salaries and, through incompetence, the esteem of the craft.[78] Behind it all operators saw a set of twin demons: the Western Union, of course, and the "teaching" (or "student" or "college") problem.

As early as the 1860s and as late as the 1890s telegraphers decried the free-and-easy opportunities available to anyone wanting to win a place at the key. Local managers or operators at lonely railroad posts with time on their hands and extra money on their minds eagerly took on students with no thought for the aggregate effect on the craft. Worse were the entrepreneurial "plug factories"

and "telegraph colleges" that lured ingenuous boys and girls with promises of high salaries and respectable white-collar jobs and then dumped them, half-trained at best, into an already overstocked labor pool. "The greatest evil which has assaulted us thus far is the large increase of late years in the number of telegraphic 'colleges' not to mention the vast number of private 'students' taught for a few dollars a head," declared the Operator in 1881. Again and again, craft journals condemned the indiscriminate manufacture of "plugs," reserving a special vehemence for the commercial "colleges," which were routinely called dishonest.[79] Teaching students in ones and twos was especially prevalent on the rail lines--"inexhaustable quarries," one operator called them in 1879--which attracted the rural youth of the surrounding country. Why, a St. Louis Knight of the Key asked his fellows in 1883, was the average railroad operator's salary so low? "Because 'there's plenty of operators.' Why so plentiful? Because the very men who are grumbling at the reductions are furnishing the surplus. Brothers!" he pleaded, "pause a moment and think if you are not contributing to the cause of your downfall." But moral suasion was not enough to deal with the "student problem." More forcefully, craft journals set out to expose and shame those who taught. "Agent J.H. Caffrey, of the C.R.I. & P., Auburn, Ills., keeps a

student," the Electric Age broadcast in 1886. "Caffrey will regret this some day."[80] The Western Union compounded the problem by running a school of telegraphy jointly with the Cooper Union Institute in New York City. Female graduates of the Cooper school, the Age contemptuously noted in 1887, received "the munificent salary of $18 per month--$3 more per month than the little check girls receive." Check girls were legitimate pretenders to a key; graduates of "plug factories" like the Cooper Union were not.[81] Yet the 60-odd graduates that the Cooper school annually turned out in the early 1880s were less a cause than a symbol of operator distress, since the Western Union's own policies on recruitment and apprenticeship were largely informal and haphazard.[82]

The way in which new telegraphers were made, then, was as much irrational as promiscuous, and so a national operators' union would do what a national telegraph company had not: build a uniform and predictable ladder of apprenticeship, promotion, and salary. The Brotherhood demanded "the suppression of fraudulent telegraph colleges, and the supplying of operators from the ranks of deserving clerks and office boys--the only students who are qualified to succeed us." The piecemeal teaching that had cheapened "our profession" would have to go, too. Instead, operators would pass the craft on as some artisans did, refusing to reveal the secrets of Morse to any

save "a brother, sister, son or daughter." The exact criteria for graduating from apprentice to journeyman operator were less explicit (or kept secret), but a period of two or three years spent learning the ways of the wires seems to have been commonly expected.[83] The Brotherhood was less creating a new kind of apprenticeship than trying to regularize and control what had generally evolved as the "legitimate," though unenforceable, norm. Honorable and legitimate apprentices, John McClelland explained to the Senate Education and Labor Committee, "rise from being check-boys and messengers. These boys in course of time, from their familiarity with the office and with the business, learn the rudiments, and, by seizing their opportunities, gain a knowledge of operating and in time become regular operators." No doubt it was all less earnest and tidy than McClelland implied. Under the best of circumstances adolescents can be difficult, and telegraph offices seldom presented the best of circumstances. "Do not forget to talk to the operators all the time," the sarcastic "Valuable Suggestions for Students, Messengers, and Others" advised aspiring telegraphers in 1871:[84]

> Ask questions about everything you don't understand, and insist on answers in full. During [press] report hour entertain the receiver with pleasant conversations on the national debt, with statistics. . . . Problems in the Rule of Three are easy to demonstrate while he is receiving the stock market. Lean closely over him all the time, especially if you have had onions for dinner. . . . Read every message to

> be sent before it is hung on the hook, you will thus learn many important matters pertaining to other people's business, of which you would otherwise be ignorant. . . . If all the operators are busy get into conversation with some other student on the line. Call one of the operators to read what he says. They like to read students' writing above all things. . . .
>
> The stove should never be filled or shaken except at report hour, and no other time should be chosen for carpenter work, cracking nuts, gymnastics, wrestling, boxing, and chair balancing. Wear heavy boots while on duty, and walk heavily on the floor and upstairs--it shows a firmness of character highly appreciated by operators.

Disciplining pesky check-boys and check-girls was still easier than disciplining the labor market. The Brotherhood's concept of a rationalized apprenticeship system always rested on the assumption that thorough organization would force the Western Union to either formally agree to a Brotherhood monopoly of training or abide a fait accompli. The union evidently never thought of asking the state to tighten the spigot by licensing operators. After the Brotherhood's collapse, though, some telegraphers, especially those on the railways, did. Like the roughly contemporary stationary engineers, railroad operators sought government regulation as a way to enhance their economic power, raise their standing, and reassure a traveling public that associated incompetent operators with horrible train wrecks--wrecks such as the one that the Boston Globe reported during the Great Strike as

THE WORK OF A "PLUG"

The Careless Conduct of an
Amateur Operator

Wrecks and Burns Two Freight Trains on
the Troy and Boston Road,

Wedging in and Burning to Cinders
Five Human Beings

The call for licensing neatly combined the operators' private interests with those of public service: Young, inexperienced, and overworked telegraphers equaled low salaries and high death tolls on the rails. Not all demands for licensing were restricted to the operators who worked the roads, nor did they always stress the matter of safety; poor service, too, was a reason to clean up the profession through examinations. But license demands were an admission that the trade union tactic of direct pressure to restrict apprenticeship had failed.[85]

The Brotherhood's claims on apprenticeship were very much in the craft union tradition, but its policy of accepting telegraph employees of all kinds was innovative. District Assembly 45 was one of the first industrial unions in the nation. It bid "linemen, clerks and other telegraphic employees" to enter its ranks.[86] Unlike earlier operator movements, its stance on the "woman question" was unequivocal: the Brotherhood was also to be

a Sisterhood, and its aims included forcing the companies to pay the Ladies of the Key according to their skill and capacity, not their gender. This drive to weld a catholic alliance of telegraph wage earners embodied the Knights of Labor's ideal of a united producing class. Potentially, it was a combination to rival the power of the Western Union--and all that the Western Union stood for.

Industrial unionism in telegraphy turned out to be deceptively broad and fatally shallow. The common plight of Brotherhood members as wage earners pulled them together, but the subcultures that uniquely set off operators from linemen, linemen from clerks, clerks from operators, and even operators from other operators tugged at them in a contrary and divisive way. Frustrated by the second Brotherhood's stillbirth in 1887, the Electric Age soberly inquired, "Is thorough organization possible in this profession of ours?" It was a good question.[87]

For one thing, there was no such indivisible entity "telegrapher." Some operators were fast, some slow. Some worked in large offices, some were stuck with their own company most of the time. Some were men, some women. Some were worldly, some hopelessly provincial. And this

all mattered as much as their shared knowledge of Morse and their often shared employer. Generally--and I over-simplify--operators fell into two rough categories: the urban, higher skilled, press and commercial telegraphers who worked alongside others like them; and the rural, less-skilled operators, almost always ensconced in signal towers or small-town depots along rail lines. Most Knights and Ladies of the Key belonged to the second group, but their prestige within the craft was low. The typical rural operator's indifferent talent and frequent need to "break" created bottlenecks in long-distance circuits that infuriated the big-city man whose status and salary depended on his ability to keep up a rapid and uninterrupted stream of dots and dashes. A commercial operator, under great pressure, "with important messages accumulating, and specials and press reports expiring on his hands," would have to wait while a railway operator, working at his own pace and with his own priorities in mind, held up the high-speed urban traffic. Stymied by such telegraphic rural idiocy, an exasperated first-class operator might hurl a caustic "Scat!" or "Swim out!" to try to clear his line. As Nattie Rogers, protagonist of the novel Wired Love, heard the call of a "little, out-of-the-way, country office" on her sounder, "she was conscious of holding in some slight contempt the possible abilities of the human portion of its machinery." Nattie was

fictitious; her sentiments toward small-town operators were not.[88]

The stops and starts on rural circuits that so frustrated the urban telegrapher were not solely due to mediocre skill. Work routines in a small railroad office were quite unlike those in the factory-like setting of 195 Broadway and its kin. Railroad operators frequently performed a great number of duties in addition to sending and receiving. While this made for variety, it could also make for harrying every bit as intense as that experienced by the specialized urban operators when the village telegrapher had to wear his (or her) several hats at the same time. "[I]t is a great pity," lamented a country operator in 1886,

> that the "small fry" of city offices cannot be placed temporarily in a position as manager, chief, receiving and delivery clerk, as well as day and night operator, all positions to be filled by one man that they might better appreciate the arduous duties involved. The duty is not a pleasant one at best, but is quite irritating when our city cousin becomes angry at the constant opening of the key to wait on a customer, to correct an error, to start out the messenger with an important C.N.D. and to answer the questions of an irate customer.

Or of a stupid one: "Thousands of so-called intelligent people," wrote W.B. Swindell, a rural North Carolina operator in the mid-1890s, "will ask if a train is coming while they hear it blowing." Silly questions, insults, freight rates, ticket prices, train schedules, signal lamps,

switches, and, no doubt, mischievous children and dogs, all competed with the key and sounder for the station agent-operator's attention.[89] Worse still, the salaries were notoriously poor and the hours notoriously, long.[90]

Rural posts were not always so hellish. Some adjusted to the peculiarities of the milieu and even did well in it. Most were of rural origin to begin with. Some, perhaps many, fit the stereotype of the country operator as gawky farm-boy or red-cheeked milkmaid who could send and receive, after a fashion. But others achieved a higher status locally, reinforcing what the Electric Age called "their close relations with rural life." Although he died fairly young, Norman Rugg, manager of the Western Union's Saratoga, New York office, had become a fixture of the village community by 1871: paterfamilias, secretary and librarian of the Baptist Sunday school, YMCA director, member of the Saratoga Musical Association, and volunteer fire company officer. At the time of the Great Strike, another railroad operator told the Telegraphers' Advocate of his satisfaction with country life. Married, receiving $55 a month plus commissions, he could rent a house cheaply and feed his family for half the year from their kitchen garden. But it was not just a matter of economy. "Above all," he claimed, "the town folks look upon me as a person of more than ordinary intelligence, and I have been chosen to fill

many places of trust." Few could have been quite so favored, but there is a plausibility about the notion of village telegrapher as important person. For small-town America, John Stilgoe points out, the local depot-cum-telegraph office was part of a "metropolitan corridor" through which rushed the urban, industrial forces reshaping the nation: a world of fast mails and fast freights, of Montgomery Ward and Standard Oil and standard time, and--as the ubiquitous blue and white signs that so many country stations wore announced--of the Western Union.[92]

But minding the gate to the metropolitan corridor did not make a railroad operator a metropolitan. He or she was still a telegraphic bumpkin. If country folk viewed the city and its metropolitan corridor with mixed suspicion and fascination, city people (excepting a minority of middle and upper-class romanticizers disgusted by urban blight and crowding) saw rural districts as comic and backward places which anyone with sense left as soon as possible. Perhaps many who disdained country life were themselves not that far removed from it, and so wished to mark the distance between city and farm all the more. In any case, along with the varied and growing catalogue of ethnic stereotypes, the dumb hick became a stock character in the sort of middling American popular culture that Puck, Judge, or Life typified. Because the

butts of the hick jokes were Protestant whites, and because the caricatures were less viciously drawn than those depicting blacks, Jews, or the Irish, it is easy to forget that the jokes must have still been painful to their subjects. And telegraphic journals were not free of such humor.

In sum, the contrast in working conditions and the cultural friction between city and country told in the Brotherhood's failure to embrace all operators, and in the reluctance of the railroad telegraphers to aid their striking counterparts. The bare mechanics of organizing the rural operators posed a problem, of course. Two months before the Great Strike, John Campbell noted how hard it was to canvass and organize the many isolated trackside telegraphers.[93] Solidarity and militance during the walkout were largely urban phenomena. "Very few country operators in this vicinity have struck," reported the Springfield Republican from Western Massachusetts. "It is only in the large cities," the Nation shrewdly observed, "that the telegraphic strikers enjoy the company and support of a crowd of their fellows. The majority of them probably have to strike alone, or in twos or threes, and solitary strikers are not apt to have much heart or hope." Nor, he might have added, much desire to forfeit the bonds that many railroad station or ticket agent-operators had to work under. When the railroad

telegraphers whom John Campbell desperately called out in August 1883 stuck to their keys, they were affirming, rather than creating, a serious schism within the craft.[94] After the Brotherhood's defeat, some tried to close the gap. "Now there is talk of organizing again," a Michigan telegrapher addressed his colleagues in 1884:

> Well, what are you going to do with the railroaders? . . . What about the lonely plug out on the prairie, a hundred miles from nowhere[?] Now, city brother, "stow" that contemptuous smile for a few minutes, and let us talk about it. What is going to be done with the thousands of railroad operators in obscure places? Of course, their copy is not copper-plate, but in the event of any unpleasantness the Western Union finds them dangerously handy.
>
> United we stand, boys. Let one trial of "going it alone" suffice.

The revived Brotherhood did try to attract rail operators, but the latter, to the extent that they organized, usually chose the Order of Railway Telegraphers, a distinctly conservative union. And divided they fell--or at least stagnated.[95]

Generations, like skill and locale, may have separated operators enough to weaken the Brotherhood. In the first few minutes of the Great Strike at 195 Broadway, the New York Times recorded this exchange between two friends:[96]

> "Come on, Ned," cried the tall man earnestly; "are you not going with us?"
>
> "No; I have had enough of strikes," said the other somewhat sadly. "I remember 1870."
>
> "So do I," replied the other bitterly, "and that memory is what rankles now."

Some of the managers who fought the Brotherhood that summer had themselves once been active in the NTU or even the TPL, having since made their peace with the Western Union and settled down to a comfortable middle age.[97] The strikers of 1883, on the other hand, were presumably young bloods itching for action and unrestrained by family obligations or career commitments. Perhaps; but it appears less clear-cut than that. Telegraphy was a young person's occupation. One reporter found the dearth of "elderly or even middle-aged men" at a Brotherhood meeting noteworthy, but that would hardly have surprised someone who knew the craft. Yet how old was "young"? There is no way to know the exact age distribution of Brotherhood members. I assume that it roughly mirrored that of the occupation overall, with the heaviest concentration in the late teens and early 20s. And the leadership? Here, again, the data are meager, but based on a sample of ten prominent Brotherhood activists whose ages (in 1883) I could find, the firebrands seem to have been older than the typical operator--they averaged 29.7 years old, to be exact.[98]

What effect this had on union solidarity I cannot say. Perhaps five or ten years' difference between the activists and the rank and file telegrapher was enough to hamper recruiting. Perhaps 19-year olds resented the leadership pretensions of those they thought little better than older brothers. Perhaps the peculiar generational bonds that united men like Eugene O'Connor and John Campbell were inadequate to weld them equally with those same 19-year olds. Part of this may have had to do with perceptions of career. A 30 or 34-year old operator had some stake in remaining in the craft, was more likely to have family responsibilities, and also more likely to feel frustrated at approaching middle age committed to a profession that had denied him mobility and recognition. In that case, unionizing to wrest a commensurate salary and prestige may have made more sense to an older operator than to a younger one who had less reason to stay with a dead-end trade and more time to play with in finding a better one. Age undoubtedly had some influence on the rise and fall of the Brotherhood. Specifically how and why remains hazy.[99]

Much less mysterious was the tension between white collars and blue ones that flawed the Brotherhood and

strained its relations with the labor movement. The adventurous and experimental plan of an industrial union combining manual and "brain" workers also had a patchwork quality and a vague uneasiness about it. Different work experiences and cultural patinas kept any number of blue-collar workers from merging into an indistinguishable wage-working mass. The distance between desk and workbench could not have made this any less so.[100]

Not that the labor movement sat with folded arms during the Great Strike. If ultimately inadequate, unions and the Knights did offer support to the operators. The challenge to Jay Gould and the Western Union had a symbolic value for an emerging working-class movement that was obvious--"a test case," as one newspaper described the labor view of the strike.[101] Expressions of worker support were commonplace in the daily accounts of the walkout. "We are all in the same boat, and we are going to stand by the telegraph boys to our last dollar," vowed a Cleveland Knight at a picnic held to raise funds for the strike. Baltimore glass blowers pledged $500. In nearby Washington, $300 came from the book-binders. Boston plasterers augmented their $100 contribution with promises of a weekly 10¢ per capita assessment.[102] Government clerks at the War and Interior Departments did their bit by getting up subscriptions for the operators, and Philadelphia shoemakers tendered $300 to the Brotherhood.[103] But

the most consistent aid came from the nation's printers; "typographical" seemed interchangeable with "solidarity" during the Great Strike.[104] "The telegraphers are fighting Labor's fight," declared the Irish World, "and should have not only the moral aid, but also the material assistance of their brother soldiers in the great Army of Industry." Individual unions, central labor unions, and Knights assemblies appeared to respond to the plea.[105]

This veneer of labor in common cause quickly cracked once the telegraphers gave up their fight. The acrimony that followed the defeat was not simply between Brotherhood officers and Knights officers, and went beyond a squabble over tactics. The mutual bitterness involved the nature of the operators themselves.

Telegraphers of the Brotherhood occupied a peculiar and paradoxical niche in 1883. They were wage earners and union members at the same time that they were middle class and "genteel." The Knights' idealism, that DA 45 embodied as an industrial union, never overcame an abiding sense of superiority toward the more usual kind of working man or woman--including those within the Brotherhood. Condescension by telegraphers toward blue-collar folk was not new. As early as 1878, an Ohio operator told the state Bureau of Labor Statistics that reducing the workday to 8 hours was unwise because "two-thirds of the laboring class of men would only spend two hours more of their time

at saloons." The Brotherhood's failure invigorated this snobbery. In his autopsy of the Great Strike, Operator editor W.J. Johnston's findings included an "unfortunate connection with a labor organization, the members of which were foreign to telegraphers in tastes, modes of living and in ideas."[106]

And none more foreign than the linemen. Tough, earthy, clad in jumpers and stout boots, the linemen made colorful copy during the strike. "We are coming here to the meeting to-morrow morning with a band, if they'll let us have one in the streets," declared James E. Smith, leader of New York's linemen, at the first strike rally, "and we'll carry our climbing-spurs over our shoulders for guns, and let the world know that we are not ashamed of ourselves." Nor need they have been ashamed, if loyalty to the Brotherhood was the criterion of pride. But it was the linemen's militance, not their solidarity, that troubled and embarrassed operators. As befit a middle-class calling, the operators were determined to carry out the struggle against the Western Union in a "gentlemanly" way--that, indeed, was what so impressed arbiters of respectable opinion such as the New York Times and Harper's. But the linemen, though Brothers, were not gentlemen. "While it is possible that some of the linemen might indulge in violence to the property of the companies," the Times noted, "the brotherhood can and

ought to restrain them, and there is every reason to be confident that it would do so." Some telegraphers were not so sure. "Our only fear," one confessed as the Great Strike began, "is lest the linemen kick over the traces and cut the wires."[107]

As it turned out, linemen did kick and cut. Early in the strike, rumors and cryptic incidents suggested that some of them had decided that sabotage of the monopoly's wires was a fair tactic. James Smith and other Brotherhood officers denied that wire cutting was sanctioned, condemned it, and promised to help catch and prosecute any telegraphic francs tireurs. As the Brotherhood's fortunes declined, reports of wire cutting increased, always linked to the "less conservative" linemen.[108] An aura of physical violence hung about the linemen, too, further mocking the union's claim of a gentlemanly struggle. On August 6, a renegade lineman provoked a fight with striking ex-workmates in which a knife had flashed and drawn blood. Although Brotherhood men were not the aggressor in the fray, they evidently had been drinking. When John Mitchell indignantly denied charges of having used the strike for personal gain, one lineman at the meeting remarked, "The man who makes money out of this strike will stand a good chance of being treated like Carey." "Carey" referred to James Carey, an Irishman who had turned informer for the British, for

which betrayal an avenging Fenian had recently cornered him on board a steamer and shot him dead.[109]

But the linemen found wire cutters far more effective than revolvers as weapons in what they plainly saw as class war--despite the operators' gentlemanly balking. "The brotherhood are too quiet here," a New York lineman complained to the Irish World.

> They'll never get a settlement with Gould by crying down wire cutting and shouting up law and order. When a monopolist finds the law interferes with him he doesn't stick to principle, but he cuts its wires with golden instruments. We poor men have no capital. We have only our strong hands to help us.

After Gould had prevailed, the World chided the operators for not having fought the Western Union, as had the linemen, on its own level. A gentlemanly stance had let a "golden opportunity" to smash the monopoly slip by.[110] Not only that. The telegraphers had been all too keen on pleasing the "capitalistic press," and now had defeat as their reward for it. But it was in character for the operators, after all. "You, defeated telegraph operator, who have always been so anxious to keep 'communistic ideas' out of the meetings," jeered "Honorius," an Irish World correspondent, "--I ask you how under Heaven you ever expect to get a fair day's wages for a fair day's work out of Jay Gould so long as you refuse to discuss in your brotherhood his right to a monopoly. . .?"[111]

Others shared his sentiments. As humbled operators

charged the Knights with a sellout and vowed to swear off unions and radicalism, labor activists simultaneously spoke of the Brotherhood's conservatism, aloofness, opportunism, and soft backbone. When John Campbell's order to call off the strike came, New York linemen blamed "kid glove operators." A Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania Knight, Terrence Lynch, wrote Grand Master Workman Powderly in much the same spirit: "There has been a great deal of gush in the newspapers about the conduct of the telegraphers during the strike but to me their conduct brings a feeling of humiliation. When I consider the encouragement they received from labor organizations all over the country to whom they had never rendered any assistance," his pen angrily scratched, "and then think of the weakness displayed by them as a body I am disgusted with them."[112] Many working people in New York evidently were disgusted too, their feelings compounded of the operators' lukewarm commitment to other wage earners and the cultural pretension of their lower-middle class rank. A local Knight, sympathetic to the telegraphers but equanimous, explained the reluctance of so many workers to wholeheartedly support the Brotherhood:[113]

> They attended the meetings of the strikers, and found them to be a party of well-dressed young men and women, wearing clothes such, as a rule, neither they nor their families wore either on Sundays or holidays. They were characterized as "dudes," and the operators, are, so to speak, the dudes of the laboring classes. The young men

> smoked cigars or cigarettes instead of pipes, and looked much more like clerks in dry goods stores, or like bookkeepers, than they did like what some of our people thought should be the outward and visible signs of laborers. Then, too, the leaders constantly counseled moderation, hissed at speakers who argued for the adoption of more violent measures, and altogether were different from the class of people they were accustomed to meet in the assemblies of laboring men. They had no confidence in what a member of my own assembly called them, the "kid-gloved laborers," and thought that donations to them would be thrown away, because they wouldn't hold out. They refused absolutely to believe that these men and women of an entirely different social scale would make so brave a fight as they did. The linemen were all right because they wore jumpers and overalls and appeared in their shirt sleeves occasionally. But the forty-five dollar suits, white neckties, "boiled" shirts, and stove-pipe hats were too much for many of the laboring men here, who didn't think such things consistent with people who called themselves laborers. That was the real cause of the apathy among laboring men here who are consistent members of the Knights of Labor, and who have never before refused to contribute liberally in aid of a strike.

The perceptive Knight might have added that the fact that telegrams were a rarity in working-class neighborhoods could not have helped the operators' cause. Businessmen and the affluent sent and received wires in the Gilded Age; the masses seldom did. It was one thing for workers to support striking brewers, whose product they knew and loved; or, as in Toronto in 1885, to support striking streetcar men, since many ordinary folk regarded the horse cars as a necessity. A quasi-luxury item like a telegram was something else again.[114]

The Great Strike, mused the Telegraphers' Advocate after the collapse, had been "a representative movement" in which all workers, and not just the operators, had had a stake. By their weak support for the telegraphers, they had "put off the day of final reckoning between capital and labor."[115] The Advocate was partly right, though strangely silent on the Brotherhood's own shortcomings in thought, word, and deed. The sheer power of the Western Union had much to do with the defeat, too. But in the end, white collars and blue collars had been more important to their wearers than a common yoke that, seen from above, obscured all color.

Although it crumbled in 1883, the Brotherhood had a substantial influence on the fate of the Knights of Labor and the widespread working-class activism that marked the decade. If anything, the Great Strike highlighted the growing sense of class divisions in America and contributed to the Knights' subsequent and dramatic expansion--despite the bitterness, wrangling, and bad press that accompanied the end of the walkout. However reluctant Powderly and other leading Knights were to support it, the Great Strike was the first national-scale uprising of labor in the decade. The Brotherhood's struggle with that most

notorious of big businesses, the Western Union, helped to focus the amorphous antimonopolism that had been growing in the 1870s. The Great Strike also underlined the parallel sentiments for a universal producers' revolt against the new realities of corporate capitalism. And it gave a material, if imperfect, demonstration of those sentiments in the Brotherhood's affiliation with the still young and obscure Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor. Telegraphers forming Local Assemblies were important in propagating the new Knights' gospel of wage-worker fraternalism. In places as distant and different as Canada and the American South, the first Knights of Labor in town were often Knights of the Key. The Order was too large and complex a phenomenon for a single strike or union to have made or broken it, of course, but for both good and ill, the Brotherhood's brief career had also shaped that of the Knights.[116]

If the Brotherhood of Telegraphers was in the Knights of Labor, to what extent was the Knights of Labor in the Brotherhood of Telegraphers? Charters, by-laws, mottoes, and passwords do not necessarily make Cooperative Commonwealthmen and women. Did operators join the Brotherhood to destroy the "wages system" and replace it with a

producers' republic, or did they simply--or pure-and-simply--want "more"?

The two ends need not have been mutually exclusive. Recent studies of the Knights and the Gilded Age labor movement refute the earlier claims of Gerald Grob and others that "reformist" and "pragmatic" (or even, amazingly, "middle-class") unionists vied with each other in the period and represented distinct and antagonistic points of view. On closer examination, Grob's ideological contenders turn out to be cardboard cut-outs, not the complex humans who actually peopled the labor movement of the 1880s.[117] What's more, ideology can exist on different levels within the same organization. Leadership and membership may have varying perceptions of such fundamentals as class. Still, there has to be consensus enough for men and women to band together in common cause. What, then, was the operators' cause?

At the least, it was protection from the Western Union and the promise of material improvement of some kind. The very size of the industry's principal employer made even the "genteel" telegraphers willing to form a union in a day when most workers remained unorganized.[118] Brotherhood recruiting circulars stressed that a strong union would mean countervailing power to the great monopoly, fair remuneration, and a stabilized labor market through controlled apprenticeship. By joining DA 45,

Brooklynite John Costello explained to a Senate panel, he and his fellows had sought "something for our services besides a bare subsistence," "mutual assistance and protection in obtaining reasonable compensation for our services" from their employers.[119] In the laissez-faire world of the 1880s, workers turned to unions for sick and death benefits, too. Although the Brotherhood did not stress friendly-society functions, it evidently performed them.[120]

Less tangibly, but no less importantly, operators could find warmth and camaraderie in union ritual. It is easy enough to snicker along with W.J. Johnston as he pronounced good riddance to the Brotherhood's "whisperings, its mummery of grips, badges and pass-words," but this misses the powerful appeal that such forms had for contemporary workers. The secrecy even makes sense given the fragility of the labor movement and the power of capital--and of the Western Union. But the ritual was not merely defensive. It affirmed solidarity and worker dignity. It served, as Richard Oestreicher points out, as "social glue," and not only for working-class Americans. Where social welfare was a private and voluntary concern, the rituals of organizations providing it had much emotional content for members. Being union members engaged in common struggle must have enhanced such feelings. "The initiations," a reporter wrote of the Boston Brotherhood

during the Great Strike, "are even more impressive than the other ceremonies, and are so conducted that every member is a party to the performance of them. The exercises are conducted amidst a silence that of itself makes them possessed of a peculiarly deep solemnity." When the same assembly formally expelled three deserters from the cause, the 200 members present then rose in unison, left hands over hearts and right hands raised oath-like, and reaffirmed their dedication to the Brotherhood. It was, the Globe recorded, an "imposing sight." And for the participants, an imposing experience as well.[121]

John Costello pronounced DA 45 "the most conservative organization that could be possibly got together," and perhaps it was. Nor was he the only one in the movement to make the claim.[122] Yet others saw the Brotherhood (and the Knights of Labor) as something more than an improved kind of trade union, and evinced an interest in questioning and changing the shape of economy and society. The Knights' talk of "cooperation" between producers had truly radical implications. Which was the authentic voice of the Brotherhood--and of the Knights?

It is frankly difficult to know. At best the Knights were eclectic, at worst, ambivalent. They represented the

political and cultural coming of age of the first generation faced with full-blooded industrial capitalism. They were young enough to ask exciting and embarrassing questions about the "wages system," but old enough to still be puzzled and troubled about property rights and the boundaries of class. When John Campbell called the Great Strike "a mild sort of revolution" before the Senate hearings, he was being both politic and utterly illogical--but not necessarily disingenuous. If we think of this generation of labor activists as being transitional--not in the sense of stumbling along a path that inevitably leads in the "correct" direction of pragmatic trade unionism, but in being open to musing, exploration, and experiment--the elusive and occasionally contradictory things that the Knights said and did make more sense. To 20th-century radical eyes, the Knights sometimes look like ideological Gumbys, stretching this way over a class line, bending that way over "cooperation," or tying themselves in knots around the "money question." But perhaps their movements were less loose than ours rigid.[123]

The Gilded Age labor movement had a refreshing open-endedness that the Knights mirrored. Look through the pages of John Swinton's Paper in the mid-1880s and find Greenbackers, German socialists, Single Taxers, pure-and-simple men, Irish Land Leaguers, and Knights as peaceable neighbors in the journal's columns. What this lacked in

uniformity it made up for in variety and wholesome debate. Currents of reform and activism overlapped and interacted, and probably nowhere so much as in the Knights of Labor.[124]

But this richness and fecundity was also a drawback. It was one thing to condemn the depredations of a bloated capitalist, but quite another to agree on exactly what a capitalist was. As Leon Fink notes, definitions of class were often elastic. The factory was ascendent but not yet universal in the late 19th century. The world of the small workshop, with its owner-craftsman who, like his employees, was also a "producer," was not yet an archaism. And so the practice of excluding the manufacturer from the parasitical, nonproductive "capitalist" class still had plausibility. Trade unionists of the 1870s, David Montgomery notes, had spoken favorably of "cooperation between capital and labor." Bankers, brokers, lawyers, speculators, and the like were drones, and the Knights barred them. But former Knights Grand Secretary Charles H. Litchman could address a rally during the Great Strike and distinguish between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" capital.[125]

The same kind of thinking existed within the Brotherhood. Even with the Western Union as adversary, some telegraphers strove to prove themselves reasonable and responsible employees, asking only fair pay and decent treatment in return. Organization, wrote Washington, D.C. Knight and telegrapher Robert De Akers in 1882, was

necessary in the new corporate age because a strong operators' union would thus be able to "arbitrate" (i.e., collectively bargain) with an equally strong Western Union. But such an arrangement betokened an ultimate harmony of interests, not class war, since it would guarantee, he argued, "safety to capital and justice to labor." Shortly before the Great Strike, the Brotherhood's quasi-official organ spoke warmly of 195 Broadway Manager William Dealy's attitude toward the fledgeling union, and hoped that other Western Union officials around the nation would follow his example. This "harmony brought about by united effort and thorough understanding" between employer and employee dissolved within a month. Yet wistful editorials about "harmony" persisted into the late 1880s. "The strongest organizations cause the least trouble," the Telegraphers' Advocate declared in 1885, speaking in praise of "arbitration" that would "amicably" settle differences between labor and capital. Foolish and arrogant company officials, the Electric Age warned, by refusing to recognize the second Brotherhood, were only "further widening the breach that now separates and antagonizes the interest" of employers and operators. One day soon, prophesied the head of the New York Brotherhood in 1887, the telegraph corporations would wake up and accept the union as a responsible partner; then, "as is now the case with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers," a grateful

Brotherhood of Telegraphers would "invite the attendance at the opening of the annual conventions of the presidents and general superintendents" of the industry.[126]

Personal ties of operators with superiors may have deepened ambiguity about the battle lines between labor and capital. The growing estrangement between managers and telegraphers in the period was clear and continual, but it was not invariable. The Electric Age could scornfully refer to Western Union General Superintendent R.C. Clowry as "Reduction Contraction Clowry," but it was not always so easy to hate lesser officials, especially if they carried out corporate directives with reluctance or distaste. On the eve of the Great Strike, an Albany telegrapher praised local manager F.W. Sabold for "not find[ing] it incompatible with a strict sense of official duty to do a good turn for the men under his charge whenever an opportunity offers."[127] When the walkout began, some managers and strikers had good-naturedly shaken hands to disclaim any personal animosity. More than one manager expressed sympathy for the union's cause, and Brotherhood spokesmen in turn pointed out that many junior managers were little better off than their subordinates--as much victims of the Western Union as the operators.[128]

On occasion, telegraphers presented their bosses with gifts and testimonial dinners, although how heartfelt and popular such tributes were is hard to gauge, and they

seem to have slackened off after the 1870s.[129] Welfare capitalism would have made employer-employee "harmony" more palatable, but there was little of it in telegraphy. Operators were allowed to send free personal messages ("dead heads") as late as the mid-1880s, and the Western Union had its employee restaurant at headquarters and its semi-official Telegraphers' Mutual Benefit Association and Serial Building Association, but these were more fragments than a system.[130] At least one company, the Bankers & Brokers, had briefly experimented with an employee profit-sharing plan in 1870, and after the failed strikes of 1870 and 1883, craft journal editorials suggested that such schemes would replace class friction with "industrial conciliation." The Western Union thought otherwise; it never adopted any such "co-operative" plan in the Gilded Age. For those who sought it, whether sophisticated managers or conservative telegraphers, "harmony" remained elusive.[131]

However hazy or supple class lines might become for operators, they did not disappear. The Brotherhood's existence betokened some kind of consensus that the corporation and its workers did not fundamentally have shared interests. Not that the operators were always bucking for

a fight. On a practical level, the Western Union was a dangerous and resilient foe. On a theoretical level, some within the labor movement--including those professing radical notions--were wary of strikes. The Knights officially frowned on them, and followed, rather than led, Local or District Assemblies that took to the picket line. But one could be both class-conscious and leery of strikes for very good reasons. Capital, particularly corporate capital, was a formidable opponent, even for a national union. Additionally, the state, despite the pieties of laissez-faire, was apt to side with capital in any struggle. During the rail strikes of 1877, still vivid and lurid reminders of the potential of class warfare, federal bluecoats had acted in the interest of the companies. Samuel Gompers, not one to shy away from a well-conceived strike, knew first-hand about capital's claim on the use of state power; had the young cigarmaker not ducked into a doorway during the Tompkins Square "riot" of 1874, a mounted policeman's club would have brained him.[132] Strikes, John McClelland told Senator Henry W. Blair in 1883, "as a rule are failures as remedial measures." But they were not a blind, meaningless lashing out by labor. On the contrary, McClelland asserted, strikes were "the direct outcome of education. The working classes as they become educated have a clearer idea of their rights."[133]

"Rights" had distinctly republican echoes. The

Jeffersonian ideal of a free and equal citizenry--of "manly" independent Americans who supported, defended, and governed themselves--was often fused with the 19th-century labor movement's demands for an end to the iniquity and inequity of industrial capitalism. If political serfdom or slavery was unjust and "unmanly," so, too, was economic subservience. The claim that all citizens were persons equal before the law was ludicrous when some of the "persons" were corporations employing hundreds or thousands of real human beings. This invocation of republicanism and equal rights was a powerful device for two reasons: it drew upon a common fund of American civic culture; and, it took a nominally political concept and raised it to a social and economic plane. Equality in the polling place began in the workplace. This had been the credo of a young nation of yeomen and craftsmen. The coming of corporate capitalism had perverted and destroyed this social equipoise. The redress had to be economic.[134]

Telegraph unionists made pointed use of the republican appeal. "The natural inheritance of every man is his own labor," Boston's Master Workman Charles Chute told a reporter calling on him at home during the Great Strike. "The patrimony of the poor workingman lies in the strength and dexterity of his hands, and it is the sacred duty of the government within the jurisdiction of which he lives to protect him in his natural rights." Under a just

settlement with the Western Union, a speaker told Chute's Local Assembly, the "faithful employe shall have secured to him that birthright of all Americans, 'manly independence.'" By the same token, the ironclad oath forced on the defeated telegraphers, John Swinton sadly observed, meant that "they had to surrender their birthright as American citizens by deserting the Telegraphic Brotherhood to which they were bound and the Knights of Labor to which they were pledged." After the debacle of 1883, republican themes still accompanied operator activism. An 1887 mass meeting of New York telegraphers in support of Henry George's United Labor Party fashioned resolutions that spoke of the deplorable dependence of the worker on his employer "as if he were not an equal, free born and independent American citizen," all of which made a mockery of "the spirit of independence which is guaranteed us by the Constitution of the United States."[135]

Melding the old claims of civic equality with newer ones of economic justice had radical implications. Dissatisfaction with the status quo--with the "wages system"--meant countering the commonplace of 1883 with a vision of something better, and, equally important, acting on that vision. Revolutions need not go forward, of course; they can be reactionary as well. Gerald Grob and those who share his interpretation of the Knights have argued that the Order was in fact backward-looking and anachronistic.[136]

Yet that seems a flawed judgment. A "pre-industrial" workplace may have shaped some Knights, but the varieties of alternative that the Order propounded were more synthetic than atavistic. The republican-labor amalgam is a perfect example of this. So were the "sub-culture of opposition" or "alternative hegemony" that Knights scholars Richard Oestreicher and Gregory Kealey and Bryan Palmer have identified as part of the movement. Both drew on the past and the present to declare cultural independence from the values of competition and individualism.[137] They could look to the future as well, particularly in the matter of "cooperation"--the ownership and control of an enterprise by those creating its wealth. The cooperative idea was not, as Gerald Grob argued, simply aimed at "establishing the workers as small independent entrepreneurs" to reproduce an "archaic" congeries of Jacksonian mills and workshops. Certainly a cooperative national telegraphic system was no such fossil.[138]

The idea was not new. While the TPL activists of 1870 had resigned themselves to the inevitability of corporate ownership of the wires, a letter to the editor of the Telegrapher the next year urged operators to better their lot by forming their own company.[139] His suggestion attracted no following in the 1870s, but talk and excitement about "Cooperation" accompanied the Brotherhood's rise early in the following decade. At delegate Harry

Orr's prompting, the union's first national convention, in October 1882, appointed a committee to study the question of cooperative telegraphy. The inaugural issue of the Brotherhood's mouthpiece, the Telegraphers' Advocate, discussed cooperation at length. The coming of a new, large-scale economy of corporations and "monopolies" had rendered the antebellum wage system obsolete, the Advocate explained. Workers of all kinds now found that "the fruit of their labor is in a great measure being lost to them" and gained by big employers. Yet the answer was not to disassemble the current industrial society but to democratize it. "Changing conditions on the one side demand changing systems on the other. If this sort of 'communism' [i.e., large-scale enterprise] is to be admitted at all, it is reasonable that it should be exercised for the benefit of all concerned." Telegrapher trade unionism was important, but it was not enough. "While we are looking to present and temporary benefits," cautioned the Advocate, "let us not lose sight of the permanent. Together with union of men let us have union of purpose in the direction of that which to us should be of vital importance--Cooperation."[140]

Telegraphers (and Knights) were no doubt attracted to the idea of cooperative enterprise for varying reasons. One man wrote the Advocate to laud the plan because "the whole thing would be a grand step forward for our profession,

as well as to [sic] demonstrate the practicability of co-operation and the American idea of common sense and justice to all, as against the communistic and foreign idea of strikes. . . ." The author of "A Telegraphist's Dream" was less concerned with class conflict and more with the meshing of individual and group interests that a co-op firm would effect:[141]

> Resting my head against the glass partition,
> I fell asleep, and soon began to dream
> I thought I had secured a good position
> With a co-operative telegraphic scheme.
>
> I thought these words appeared before my vision,
> Written in gold upon the office wall:
> "He will do most to better his condition
> Who does most for the interest of all."
>
> This principle was carried out in practice;
> Each man to business strictly did attend.
> The explanation's plain; indeed the fact is
> Each had an interest in the dividend.

Philadelphia's dentist-cum-telegrapher Harry Orr likewise thought that as their own bosses, operators could both eliminate the skimming of "middlemen or outsiders" and ply their craft cheerfully and industriously. "It was my hope that that would be the result of the organization of the Brotherhood," he told a Senate hearing. John McClelland defined cooperation even more broadly. Like Orr, he called for doing away with middlemen and restricting any co-op telegraph company to those who performed telegraphic labor. Provided sufficient capital, he testified, "the linemen now in the employ of the telegraph companies

could construct the line, and the operators and the managers now in the employ of the telegraph companies could operate it."[142] But where, Chairman Blair asked, would the cooperators get the capital to set up their company? From the government, replied McClelland:

> If the Government should say to the telegraphers' organization as it is at present constituted, embracing all the talent and skill necessary to conduct a system of telegraphing from the highest to the lowest branches of it--if the Government should say . . , "We will take your labor and skill, which we know you possess, as sufficient security--as sufficient basis for credit, and we will advance you the necessary capital to carry on the business," it seems to me that would be entirely practicable. Because it is upon the labor of the employes of capital that the capitalist obtains his credit now, and why should not the same system be extended by the Government to such an organization of workingmen?

In fact, why not enable <u>all</u> producers to benefit from such a scheme of state credit? "These organizations of different industries," McClelland explained, "would be the recognized contractors for the performance of their several kinds of work. They would then carry on the different branches of trade only to the extent that was found necessary."

"And all the profits of each avocation," Senator Blair inquired, "would be distributed, I suppose, among those engaged in it?"

"Certainly," said McClelland.[143]

Few Knights, and still fewer telegraphers, shared McClelland's vision of cooperation. When Senator Wilkinson Call asked John Costello whether the Brotherhood was

based on the promise of cooperative telegraphy, the latter demurred. "No sir;" said he, "I do not understand that that is our object." The Brotherhood was simply a trade union and that, Costello asserted, was "the general sentiment." It evidently was. Both Harry Orr and John McClelland, keen cooperators that they were, confessed that most of their Brothers and Sisters had little interest in the matter.[144]

Such interest as there was picked up during the Great Strike. On July 23, the Boston Globe reported that the operators' union was exploring the possibility of setting up a "co-operative telegraph company," and during the following week the details of a proposed alternative to the Western Union emerged. But the plan envisioned cooperation of a markedly conservative kind: the "Merchants' and Telegraphists' Association" was to be a joint venture between operators and businessmen. The Association was a blend of the Brotherhood's original idea for a worker-owned system and that of a New Jersey silk manufacturer, John D. Cutter, who, like many independent businessmen, resented the power of the Western Union. "[M]any rich merchants who have become anti-monopolists because of railroad and telegraph mismanagement and tyranny," noted the Globe, were said to be joining Cutter in support of the venture. One account had 200 enthusiastic merchants' letters flowing into Cutter's office asking to be put down

as subscribers. "Capitalists have promised us that they will help make the enterprise a success," exulted John Campbell.[145]

The Brotherhood would supply the labor and managerial skill of its members, while the merchants, bankers, and brokers who subscribed would furnish the bulk of the capital. But while no model of worker collectivism, neither was the Merchants' & Telegraphists' Association an ordinary capitalist concern. There would be no stock per se, but "initiation fees of life membership," at $200, limited one to a customer. "A member cannot increase his interest, nor diminish it, nor terminate it," a Brotherhood circular explained. "Membership not being property is not marketable, so cannot fall into the hands of sheriff or surrogate." Nor could it be "bulled, beared, [or] consolidated." In essence, the Association was a producer-consumer co-op.[146] Brotherhood leaders urged operators to subscribe (the $200 could be paid in installments) and to canvass home-town businessmen for memberships in the Association. "I believe I can raise $200,000 or more among my antimonopoly friends in New York City," R.H. Ferguson, a Knights organizer in upstate New York, wrote Terence Powderly. "All I want is the authority to try and I will go there and then work here in this city and I suggest that the assemblies be Each asked to take a share or more at $200."[147]

But there were few takers, either among the Knights or the business community. Perhaps the press had exaggerated the extent of support for the scheme. Wealthy merchants and bankers did often hate the Western Union, but they were no fools when it came to what they did with their money. It was much cheaper to wish the Brotherhood well than to throw $200 in the direction of a dubious venture. Such capitalists, the Operator concluded after the walkout, were "chary of investment in an enterprise the success of which, in the absence of precedent, must be extremely problematical." After the initial excitement at the prospect of throttling Jay Gould and his monopoly subsided, businessmen of probity had second thoughts about the Association. And with good reason. Any new telegraph company, Western Union officials pointed out, would have to secure a great network of rural and urban rights-of-way. "No new company can be successful without the contracts between the railroads and Western Union," declared a corporate officer. He was right. And if substantial bankers and merchants were reluctant to fund the Association, who else would--$40 a month railway operators? By summer's end, the plan for a cooperative telegraph company, like the Great Strike, was dead.[148]

Telegraphers had sought to better their condition by forming unions. Unions, though, had had little effect on the craft's decline. Operators also tried the Cooperation route to end the Western Union's "grinding," but that, too, had failed. They consequently turned to the one remaining source of redress: the state.

Some did so hesitantly. Gilded Age Americans, and no less so labor activists, still harbored ambivalence about the state and the citizen's relation to it. The same republican ethos that workers so tellingly used in combination with demands for economic justice also contained a classical liberal strain in which the state was a government by the people--not by professionals and placemen--whose legitimate functions were limited and largely negative. Strong and intrusive central governments and the legalized robbery of mercantilism were part of the tyranny and decadence of the Old World; civil liberties and laissez-faire were the bases of the enlightenment of the New. Nineteenth-century Americans of all classes, David Montgomery writes, shared an "incapacity to envision the state as an administrative agency, rather than simply as a lawgiver," and this surely applied to operators contemplating a government-run telegraph system as their last hope.[149] Nor was suspicion of the state just a matter of theory. Labor activists of the 1880s had evidence enough within their lifetime of the repressive

potential of government in class strife. Not surprisingly, some operators shied away from statist solutions, offering instead something that partook of both antimonopolism and a kind of syndicalism. Pointing to the success of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, one operator warned his craftmates in 1888 that only a strong union capable of "enforcing its righteous demands" would solve the telegraphers' problem, not "class legislation," which was "always dangerous to individual liberty"; if you must pass laws, he wrote, pass ones that break up "monopolies, trusts and combinations of what-so-ever character." Fair Plan and an Open Field would take care of the rest.[150]

But the verities of 18th-century political economy were a stale loaf by the 1880s, increasingly hard to swallow and no longer very nourishing. The corporate economy taking shape no more resembled that of the early Republic than the Western Union resembled the Boston Post Road. Massed capital and labor's attempt to mass in response were part of this transformation; an extension of governmental responsibilities would have to be as well. Besides, a government telegraph was more evolutionary than revolutionary--it was only moving along a logical continuum to go from carrying letters to sending telegrams. The state had built or subsidized canals, railroads, and the like because they were commercial arteries serving the public. Why not now the telegraph as well?[151]

"Government" and "corruption" often seemed interchangeable in the age of the Tweed Ring, the Star Route Fraud, and Credit Mobilier, though. In that case, replied government telegraph proponents, establish the system on a meritocratic, civil-service basis. A state monopoly was at least accountable to the people; the Western Union only had to answer to its stockholders. "In behalf of the telegraphers," former manager Alfred Seymour addressed Senators three days after the Great Strike ended, "as one of those who have appeared before this committee representing the telegraphers in part, I wish to state that they look to Congress and the Government for relief in the future. . . . before all, the telegraphers desire a Government system of telegraph, I believe." "It may be that the corporations will never yield justice to the men," concluded the Electric Age in 1886. "In such an event, the latter will find it to their advantage to hasten postal telegraphy."[152]

A good way to do so was to become politically active. To the extent that operators as a group supported any political faction in the 1880s, they chose Henry George's independent United Labor Partyof 1886-88. Besides telegraphers, George's campaign attracted a fairly broad coalition of reform and labor activists, especially during his 1886 run for the New York City mayoralty. Henry George was an old friend of the Knights and Ladies of the Key.

He had warmly supported the Brotherhood in 1883, and his Single Tax theory admitted a state role in owning and operating natural monopolies. Four years after the Great Strike, campaigning for state office in New York, he asked a gathering of operators who had turned out to hear him,

> Couldn't you work as comfortably for the Government as for the Western Union? The north and south pole of our platform is the governmental control of all monopolies. Band together to disseminate our principles. Talk with your brother operators over the wire. Give them something to think about.

His auditors were convinced. Calling themselves the Telegraphers' Association, they adopted a resolution supporting George and his ticket.[153]

It made good sense for telegraphers to rally to a man committed to setting up a public telegraph system, but some operators' devotion to the Georgite cause went deeper. For believers, the Single Tax was an epiphany: the operators' longstanding decline was but another manifestation of the "land question." It was quite simple, explained James P. Kohler, a New York telegrapher who stumped for George and the ULP. "We must control supply and demand in the labor market," he told his fellows during the 1886 campaign, "so that positions for telegraphers shall be as plentiful as autumn leaves." Liberate "capital and labor from their bondage," Kohler cried, and the lot of all telegraphers would improve. Why? Because the "wages that should come to us laborers and the dividends

that should go to our employers have been going in ever-increasing proportions to the landlord as rent." It was foolish, he said, to blame the paucity of telegraphic berths on the "student question" or the "lady operator question." No. "There is better game," declared Kohler, and that was the "land question." "Will we embrace this God-given opportunity to hit corruption, wage-slavery and landlordism a fair and square blow?" he asked his colleagues. "If we would, then, as one man, let us to the polls! to the polls!"--to elect Henry George.[154] Next year, like-minded operators formed a Telegraphers' Land and Labor Club to discuss and propagate the Single Tax idea among the craft. Renouncing "strikes, boycotts and all other artificial means of alleviating our condition as wage-earners" (and that included the "folly to attempt to build a fence around our trade"), Club members instead urged operators to turn to the ballot box and the state.[155]

Georgite doctrines did not charm everyone. Washington, D.C. telegrapher H.S. Larcombe dismissed the Single Tax as "communistic." L.H. Morgan, of Leavenworth, Kansas, maintained that operators would better their condition by swearing off drink and pool halls, not engaging in politics and reform. The Electric Age's "De" penned a tart piece in which he had an imaginary conversation with a spectral operator. "I was talked to death on the 'Private ownership of land,'" the ghost explained. "If you want to avoid

a sure death, get on the day force where there are no Henry George men."[156]

For those who did turn to the United Labor Party, ethnicity, as well as immediate self-interest and economic doctrine, may have played a role. If, as I suspect, a large number of urban telegraphers were of Irish-American background, the Georgite emphasis on the "land question" neatly dovetailed with an abiding concern among that group with matters of land and poverty. Eric Foner has demonstrated that agitation over an Ireland oppressed by landlords and British imperialism combined in the 1880s with domestic labor and reform activism in a dynamic way. Prominent among these companionate reform currents was the Single Tax. Nowhere was this unique mix more visible than in the Irish World, a journal that managed, in equal parts, to cover the labor movement, general reform efforts, and the fate of the Irish on both sides of the Atlantic--and, even more important, to make explicit the connections between all three.[157] The World was no stranger to the telegraphers. It had cheered the Brotherhood on in 1883, and after the defeat rebuked it for its priggishness in general, and its official aloofness from the "land question" in particular.[158] Perhaps some operators active in the post-strike Brotherhood reconsidered the relevance of the Single Tax to their own plight and that of their cousins in Ireland. In any case, the Knights, Georgites,

and transplanted Hibernians were often of a piece in the Gilded Age labor movement. It seems appropriate that an ardent United Labor Party man who urged his fellow telegraphers to follow his example in 1887 was named John J. Flanagan.[159]

Flanagan is symbolic in more ways than one. Very likely he was the same J.J. Flanagan whom we met at the National Telegraphic Union's 1865 convention arguing that accepting clerks as members would degrade the union. Flanagan and his NTU colleagues had come a long way since then: from conservative friendly society to militant trade union to industry-wide wage-earners' alliance to politicized interest group. But the latter two incarnations covered more distance than they superficially imply. As Knights and Single Taxers, the telegraphers had accepted a reading of their plight that went beyond immediate interest. However flawed the "educational" notions of the Order and the land fetish of the Georgites, both pointed to social problems and solutions, not those of individual thrift and sobriety or trade union tactics. That the various operators' efforts failed, from the NTU through the Brotherhood, is only part of the story. Their successive failures were a process of exploration and discovery, not necessarily steps in a teleological climb to the Cooperative Commonwealth. The political path that many craft activists adopted in the late 1880s was as much

a product of frustration as enlightenment, but it was also significant. Turning to politics and the state had its dangers, to be sure. The same radical republican ideology of equal rights that questioned the economic order, notes Richard Oestreicher, could also have a profoundly reactionary content, wistfully invoking a mythical past blessed by a "naturally harmonious relationship between classes." But envisioning a government-owned telegraph system was no more a throwback than the earlier cooperative plans of the Brotherhood. Both, to paraphrase Kealey and Palmer, were dreams of what might be. And both were products of what the Knights liked to call "education."[160]

N O T E S

[1]The older and generally hostile view of the Knights held that the Order was reactionary and utopian, a curious relic of Jacksonian reformism that could not realistically deal with a modern, corporate, industrial economy. But in contrast to these impractical and ideological dreamers, the argument continued, were the pragmatic and effective "pure-and-simple" business unionists of the American Federation of Labor stripe, personified by Samuel Gompers, who represented an authentic (and non-ideological) working-class response to American conditions.

This interpretation drew heavily on the so-called Wisconsin School of Labor History represented by pioneer scholars John Commons and Selig Perlman, and its last and most polished version was Gerald N. Grob's Workers and Utopia (New York, 1969 [1961]). Grob's monograph reflected both the Commons-Perlman tradition and the generally conservative climate of post-World War II American academe. The "Consensus School" historians writing in the 1940s and 50s argued against the existence of a significant strain of American radicalism in the past, stressing instead the "non-ideological," "pragmatic," and cross-class agreement on liberal capitalist values. Grob (p. 189) went so far as to assert that Gilded Age workers "had adopted a middle-class value system and psychology. . . ."

The only extant study of telegraph unions, Vidkunn Ulriksson's The Telegraphers. Their Craft and Their Unions (Washington, D.C., 1953), shares the Consensus School view --not surprisingly, since Ulriksson (himself a former operator) was a student of Selig Perlman.

The recent scholarship that has influenced my own reading of the Knights reflects the tempering of the "new social history" of the past 20 or so years, and is generally sympathetic (if not uncritical) toward the Order. I will return to this interpretation in greater detail. For now, it will suffice to mention three prominent examples of this Knights revisionism: Leon Fink, Workingman's Democracy (Urbana, 1983); Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, Dreaming of What Might Be. The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880-1900 (Cambridge, Eng., 1982); and Richard J. Oestreicher, "Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875-1900" (unpublished ms.)

Finally, in reviewing Knights historiography, I am compelled to mention an older study, Norman J. Ware's The Labor Movement in the United States 1860-1895 (New York,

1929). Ware was skeptical, perhaps even cynical, and certainly disillusioned. But his rambling and idiosyncratic book is still valuable, informative, and stimulating on the Order.

[2]Ulriksson, Telegraphers, p. 16; Robert Luther Thompson, Wiring a Continent (Princeton, 1947), pp. 389-390; David Montgomery, Beyond Equality (New York, 1972), pp. 458-459.

[3]Ulriksson, Telegraphers, p. 16; Thompson, Wiring, pp. 389-390; the Telegrapher, Nov. 1 and 6, 1865.

[4]Montgomery, Beyond Equality, pp. 458-459; Ulriksson, Telegraphers, pp. 16-17.

Neither did the NTU's militant successor, the TPL, attend any national labor congresses.

[5]George E. McNeill, ed., The Labor Movement. The Problem of To-Day (Boston, 1887), p. 390; Ulriksson, Telegraphers, pp. 18-20.

[6]Ulriksson, Telegraphers, pp. 18-20; Cincinnati Inquirer, Jan. 4, 1870, quoted in NYH, Jan. 6, 1870.

As late as the early 1900s, operators used the term "sliding scale" to refer to the Western Union practice of filling vacant positions at successively lower salaries. But the "Sliding Scale" had originally been the across-the-board pay cuts that the company effected in early 1876. My own use of the term refers to that specific incident, and not the other general (and long-term) practice. But the fact that the term survived in widespread use among telegraphers up through 1907 (in its looser meaning of successive cuts) says much about Western Union personnel and salary policy well after the Great Strike. For its continued presence in 1907, see Elizabeth Beardsley Butler, Women and The Trades (New York, 1911), p. 294.

[7]Ulriksson, Telegraphers, pp. 20-21.

[8]Telegraphers' Protective League, "Confidential Circular," in Box 26, Western Union Collection, Division of Electricity and Modern Physics, Smithsonian Institution, (hereafter cited as WUC); Ulriksson, Telegraphers, p. 17; on "pure-and-simple" unions, see Ware, Labor Movement, pp. 168-169; and John Laslett, "Reflections on the Failure of Socialism in the American Federation of Labor," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, March 1964.

[9]Ulriksson, Telegraphers, pp. 23-24.

A second operator also lost $5 a month while a third

gained $20. The losers were recent additions to the office.

[10]See Ch. III above. Indeed, taking the period 1865 to 1870, there was considerable deflation. I do not know what the actual figures at San Francisco were beyond the cuts; but taking a hypothetical salary of $120 or $110 a month for a first-class operator, and instituting a $5 cut between 1865 and 1870, the results (in constant 1910-14 dollars) come out this way:

Nominal Salary:	1865	$120	(or $110)
	1870	$115	(or $105)
Constant Salary:	1865	$ 64.86	(or $59.45)
	1870	$ 85.18	(or $77.77)

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Historical Statistics of the United States (Washington, D.C., 1975), Pt. 1, p. 201.

[11]"Confidential Circular."

[12]NYH, Jan. 6, 1870; Historical Statistics, Pt. 1, pp. 200-201, Pt. 2, pp. 787-788; Department of Commerce and Labor, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1910 (Washington, D.C., 1911), p. 257; EA, Dec. 16, 1886.

Unfortunately, I cannot add full figures on profit rates for the same period because book value figures are missing for 1870-72; but the profit rate did decline from 1868-69 (from 5% to 4%) while the rate of dividend declarations (on book value) climbed from around 1.7% to 3.7% in the same period. This, too, though sketchy, suggests pressures to cut expenses that may have taken the form of salary decreases.

[13]BH, July 15, 1883; "Confidential Circular"; Ulriksson, Telegraphers, p. 28.

[14]Ulriksson, Telegraphers, pp. 24-29 and passim; NYT, editorial quoted in JT, Feb. 1, 1870, see also JT for a hostile New York World editorial; and BG, July 25, 1883, which has "one of the leading operators in Boston" summarizing the reasons for the earlier strike's failure, citing, among other things, poor timing, "young, hot-headed" leaders "who lacked judgment and organizing power," and the secrecy and centralized direction of the TPL.

[15]Telegrapher, Nov. 19, 1870, Jan. 28 and Apr. 15, 1871; Ulriksson, Telegraphers, p. 29.

[16]Historical Statistics, Pt. 2, p. 788.

[17]See Ch. II above, passim, for the Western Union's

corporate biography in the Gilded Age.

[18]The Operator, Jan. 1, 1876, Aug. 15, 1879, June 1, 1883; Telegrapher, Oct. 9, 1875.

A California operator reported (though approvingly) that the local managers, "and the Western Union especially," were exercising a moral police over younger operators who spent their off-duty time in pool-rooms, gambling houses, and the like (Operator, Apr. 1, 1879). Seven years after he severed his ties with the Western Union rather than abandon his paper, W.J. Johnston mentioned "a Western Union General Order in existence forbidding its employes to engage in 'other business'. . . ." (Operator, Apr. 1, 1882). For various complaints of corporate harrassment around the time of the Great Strike, see BG, July 17, 1883; NYT, July 17 and Aug. 3, 1883; CPD, July 30, 1883.

[19]On salary cuts, see Ch. III above

[20]Operator, Nov. 1, 1878, Jan. 15, 1880.

[21]Ibid., Aug. 1, 1882; NYT, July 17, 1883; see also Ch. III above, pp. 15-16.

[22]Ch. II, above

[23]Operator, Jan. 15, 1875, Nov. 1, 1878, Sept. 1, 1879.

The Eckert-Orton split may have involved a combination of Eckert's sense of stymied ambition and the intrigues of Jay Gould. The rift went at least as far back as May 1873, when they exchanged what Eckert later called "acrimonious correspondence." Orton accused the General, "while holding a confidential position with this Company" of having been "secretly carrying on negotiations with its enemies" --no doubt referring to Gould's Atlantic & Pacific Telegraph Co., of which Eckert, after resigning from the Western Union, became president. There may have been differences over technical and managerial matters, too; Eckert struck some as stubborn and conservative on technological questions. See Operator, Jan. 15, 1875; Alvin F. Harlow, Old Wires and New Waves (New York, 1936), p. 235; Matthew Josephson, The Robber Barons (New York, 1934), p. 205; Frank Lewis Dyer and Thomas Commerford Martin, Edison (New York, 1929), Vol. I, p. 165; Telegrapher, Feb. 4, 1871.

[24]Telegrapher, Jan. 14 and 28, 1871, see also Feb. 4, 1871.

In the absence of organized resistance, some,

especially telegraph journalists, urged operators to seek justice from their employers by airing grievances and exposing managerial malefactors in the pages of the craft press--this was especially true in the 1870s and in the late 80s, both periods that followed the collapse of operator unionism. See Telegrapher, Aug. 27, Sept. 24 and Dec. 24, 1870; Operator, Dec. 9, 1882.

[25]Telegrapher, July 29, 1871.

Part of Ashley's conservatism may have derived from his entrepreneurial status. In addition to editing and publishing the Telegrapher, he was secretary and treasurer of the American Printing Telegraph Company of New York, which advertised itself as "Contractors and Builders of Commercial and Private Telegraph Lines" (Telegrapher, Nov. 19, 1870). Despite the trends that the Western Union exemplified, the telegraphic world of 1871 was still such that the line between tinkerers, operators, and businessmen was hazy and permeable--think, for example, of Thomas Edison at around this time. This, too, may explain the general conservatism and individualism of many operators.

[26]JT, Sept. 16 and Oct. 1, 1872.

The preamble acknowledged the inevitability of telegraphy being conducted by a large corporation and disavowed strikes, but declared that "as a means of attaining our aims we seek to build up, as a protection against the aggressions of this powerful accumulation of capital, an organization of labor . . . which shall become equally powerful and equally worthy of respect."

[27]Telegrapher, Dec. 15, 18 and 25, 1875.

Ulriksson mentions a Telegraphers' Protective Union that was supposed to have lasted from 1875 to 1877. (Telegraphers, p. 32.)

[28]Telegrapher, Aug. 12, 1871; Operator, Jan. 1, July 15 and Dec. 15, 1875, Jan. 15, 1876, see also Jan. 15, 1881.

[29]Operator, Sept. 1, 1877 and Nov. 1, 1878.

For other examples of Johnston as telegraphic Pollyanna, see Operator, Jan. 1 and Oct. 15, 1881. In the latter editorial, he praises the "generous spirit" of the new General Manager of the Western Union, Thomas T. Eckert.

[30]David Montgomery, Workers' Control in America (Cambridge, Eng., 1979), pp. 11-15; Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital (New York, 1974), p. 96.

[31]Jonathan Prude, "The Social System of Early New

England Textile Mills: A Case Study, 1812-1840," in Michael H. Frisch and Daniel J. Walkowitz, Working-Class America (Urbana, 1983), p. 22; James R. Green, The World of the Worker (New York, 1980), p. 103.

[32]BG, Aug. 21, 1883.

[33]JT, June 15, 1874; NYT, July 12, 1883; TA, July 1, 1883; on deteriorating service, mistakes, high pressure, and craft pride, see, e.g., JT, Jan. 15, 1875; Operator, Aug. 1 and Sept. 15, 1881

[34]Telegrapher, Oct. 15, 1870; on turnover and labor market, see Ch. III above.

Gordon, Edwards, and Reich note that high turnover as a form of resistance by unorganized workers in the early 20th century was largely confined to the semi- and unskilled hands in the new mass production industries. The telegraphers, of course, were still mostly skilled, although telegraphy, like the assembly-line work, was especially susceptible to high-pressure flow--and employee "burn-out." A large telegraph office of the 1880s and the Highland Park Ford plant of the 1910s, mutatis mutandis, may have shared much, including a highly fluid work force. On high turnover and the factories, see David M. Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, Segmented Work, Divided Workers (Cambridge, Eng., 1982), pp. 148-149.

[35]Operator, July 15 and Aug. 1, 1879, Apr. 15, 1880. The last operator, the sole telegrapher in the small town in which he lived, went on to say, "Boys, do wake up and take action. You will be doing more for operators than the [Western Union-sponsored] 'Mutual Benefit Association.' It is a splendid organization to take care of our families after we die, but we want something to help us take better care of them now before we die, and of ourselves while alive."

[36]Operator, June 1, July 15 and Nov. 15, 1881, Feb. 1, 1882.

John B. Taltavall, secretary of the New York group, would later publish the TA and EA and serve as the Knights Brotherhood's semi-official journalist. The Operator (July 1, 1881) reported branches of the TMU as far south as Galveston and west as Ogden.

[37]Operator, Aug. 15, Sept. 1 and 15, 1882. The strike lasted two weeks.

[38]Operator, Jan. 1 and Aug. 15, 1882, see also May 15, 1882 for Washington, D.C. operator Robert L. De Akers's

call for national organization; for talk of organizing and a possible national strike against the Western Union in the wake of the Denver affair ("you cannot put Italians or soldiers in our places"), see Operator, Aug. 1, 1882.

[39]Ware, Labor Movement, xviii, and Chapts. II-IV passim.

[40]Ibid., Ch. IV passim.

[41]BH, July 23, 1883; EA, June 1, 1886; Operator, Feb. 1, 1882.

[42]Operator, Feb. 1, 15 and Apr. 1, 1882.
The notices for the rival conventions appeared on the same page, in the same column, of the Operator. Curiously, the proceedings of the Pittsburgh convention expressed a conservative and conciliatory stance toward capital ("we recognize and fully appreciate the fact that the interests of the various telegraph and railroad companies are identical with our own," "we earnestly deprecate strikes"). The Brotherhood meeting, (though its proceedings were, like those of the UTA, only summarized in the Operator) seems to have been more concerned with specific mechanisms for dealing with grievances. What's more, the tone of the meeting seems more assertive than the UTA's: the Brotherhood "demanded" ten days' notice for dismissals, and that the grading of an operator based on skill would be jointly determined by the local Brotherhood and the company. Perhaps more militant operators showed up at Cincinnati than were expected. As for the UTA's caution, it no doubt reflected in part a desire for eventual amalgamation with the Brotherhood. One UTA resolution declared, "we cordially invite the cooperation of the delegates to the late [Brotherhood] convention at Cincinnati, and feel assured that the action of this convention should and will in every way meet their approbation."

[43]Ware, Labor Movement, p. 128; Journal of United Labor, May 1882 (hereafter cited as JUL); Terence V. Powderly, Thirty Years of Labor (Philadelphia, 1890), p. 330.
DA 45 was the first such National District Assembly based on a particular industry. I am obliged to Miriam Chrisman and Dean Ware for help in translating the Latin motto.

[44]Brotherhood of Telegraphers of the United States and Canada (BTUSC), "Proceedings," Cincinnati, Oct. 1882, pp. 19, 24 in Powderly Papers Collection, Catholic University

(hereafter cited as PP); BTUSC, Circular, Dec. 27, 1882, in PP; BTUSC, Circular, May 20, 1883, in PP.

The membership totals broke down this way: 3,883 railroad operators, 3,429 commercial operators; 742 non-operators; 139 "out of service"; and of the total membership, 501 were listed as being in "Bad Standing."

John Campbell estimated that the total number of operators at the time in the U.S. and Canada was 22,200.

[45] TA, June 1, 1883; see also NYT, July 12, 1883. "Subs" refers to the substitutes operators were required to provide in their stead if they wanted (or needed) time off.

[46] Circular, May 20, 1883; JUL, June, 1883.

[47] BTUSC, Circular, June 25, 1883, in PP.

[48] "Proceedings," pp. 13-17; McNeill, Labor Movement, p. 391; AC, July 20, 1883.

The original grievance draft called for ending compulsory Sunday duty; 8-hour day and 7-hour night shifts; a universal pay hike of 25% that would not increase any current operator's salary to over $100 a month (or if the raise still left an operator's salary too low, given the service "he or she performs," the salary would be further negotiated upward); and included demands concerning extra work, split tricks, and dinner breaks. The bill made no specific mention of ending sexually discriminatory pay differentials, or of linemen's or railroad operators' salaries, or of restricting the teaching of telegraphy, though these were part of the Brotherhood's declaration of principles at the 1882 conclave ("Proceedings," p. 24). The original draft also carefully outlined the procedure for ratification of the bill by the membership at large, presenting the bill to the telegraph companies, attempting arbitration, and, if rebuffed, striking.

[49] Bradstreet's, July 28, 1883, quoted in Operator, Aug. 1, 1883; U.S. Senate, Report of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital (Washington, D.C., 1885), Vol. I, p. 911; see also BH, July 16 and 28, 1883; BG, July 31, 1883.

[50] BH, July 16, 1883; Circular, June 25, 1883.

Or perhaps the withdrawals simply reflected a limited view of the Brotherhood's goals and bounds on the part of conservative operators. The bill of grievances had the potential of becoming a strike. On the day before the Great Strike, the BH reported that "some of the operators

claim that they were misled in joining this brotherhood, it having been represented to them that it was entirely a benevolent organization, not having any power to order strikes." The paper also had 195's Manager Dealy claiming to have many letters from his operators with similar tales of being misled, though the Herald noted that he only produced one letter for the reporter's inspection. BH, July 18 and 19, 1883.

[51]BG, July 16, 1883.

The Brotherhood used such a device as early as December 1882, but not all LAs did, and John Campbell recommended that LAs only adopt it as a last resort. See Circular, Dec. 27, 1882.

[52]NOP, July 19, 1883; Senate, Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 184.

We can never be certain about the exact number of members or strikers. The 8,000-10,000 figure comes from Harry Orr's testimony before the Senate Education and Labor Committee hearings, and seems plausible given the Brotherhood's May 1883 rolls of around 8,100. How many joined in the excitement of the first week, when the union's chances looked good, is impossible to know--as, for that matter, is the number of defections and scabs. Orr claimed a total Brotherhood membership (which would have included non-striking press and rail operators) of 18,000-19,000, but this seems dubious considering the failure of the railroad callout in August. The BG (July 23, 1883) said the Brotherhood began the strike with 15,000 members and had gained 2000 more within four days--probably an enthusiastic and inflated estimate. Ulriksson (p. 32) gives the Brotherhood membership as between 10,000-11,000, but (as he does so often) neglects to cite his source.

[53]See Ch. I above.

[54]New York State Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Third Annual Report, 1885 (Albany, 1886), pp. 587, 591 TA, Sept. 1, 1883; NYTr, Aug. 23, 1883.

The blacklist was not used solely to ostracize union activists; it also marked off operators who had broken various rules, incurred their superiors' disfavor for some reason, or were thought undesirable because of alcoholism or the like. For a complaint in the mid-1880s about the blacklist's arbitrary and promiscuous use by Western Union chiefs and managers, see EA, June 1, 1886.

As for General Eckert, he continued to do vigorous battle with the Western Union's enemies, whether labor or

capital. During a legal imbroglio over the receivership of the bankrupt Merchants' & Bankers' Telegraph Co. in 1885, the sexagenarian Eckert personally led a detachment of Western Union men into the main B & M office in New York City which cut the wires leading to the rival American Rapid Co. and then re-connected them to Western Union lines. Operator, July 25, 1885.

[55]JSP, Dec. 16, 1883; see also McNeill, Labor Movement, p. 392.

The improvement concerned cutting day shifts from 9½ to 8½ hours and night shifts from 8 to 7½, and a rearrangement of days so that a work month was now 26 rather than 30 or 31 days long. The operator whom Swinton interviewed said that this in effect meant a $10-$20 a month gain. Right before the strike, there had also been a Western Union concession on hours; see Ch. I above.

Tom O'Reilly, the Scottish Wheatstone operator and Brotherhood activist, claimed that the strike also resulted in more respectful treatment for operators. "The chiefs used to say, 'Here, you, get on to that Chicago wire,'" he told John Swinton. "There was 'Big Steve,' never known to say mister to an operator in his life, and always nagging Brotherhood men. Look at him now. We are treated more decently." "We were formerly spoken to as if we were a lot of animals; but we can talk to the chief operators without falling on our knees," O'Reilly said, "and the manager will even hear our complaints, so that we can have some self-respect." JSP, Dec. 12, 1883.

[56]BH, Aug. 11, 1883; NYT, Aug. 17, 1883; BG, Aug. 18 and 19, 1883; BET, Aug. 18, 1883; see also TA, Aug. 16 and Sept. 1, 1883; AC, Aug. 23, 1883; Operator, Sept. 1, 1883, NOP, Aug. 19, 1883; BG, Aug. 18, 1883; NYT, Aug. 17, 19 and 20, 1883; BH, Aug. 12 and 19, 1883; NYTr, Aug. 18, 1883.

At St. Louis, a Brotherhood official divided his contempt between the Knights and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers; the latter organization, he said, had "disappointed us greatly," presumably by not striking in support of the operators. See NYT, Aug. 19, 1883.

The AC reported from Pittsburgh that glass workers there, already disgusted with the strike policy of the Knights, withdrew from the Order to form independent unions upon hearing of the Brotherhood's defeat. AC, Aug. 22, 1883.

[57]EA, June 1 and July 1, 1886.

[58]Ibid., June 16, 1886; Terence V. Powderly (ed. H.

Carman, H. David, and P.N. Guthrie), The Path I Trod (New York, 1940), pp. 106-108.

For denials of Knights culpability, see NYTr, July 24, 1883; BG, Aug. 22, 1883; TA, Sept. 1, 1883, NYT, Aug. 20, 1883; CPD, Aug. 22, 1883.

After defending the Knights and noting the Brotherhood's miscalculations, McClelland told a reporter: "I must confess, however, that I was surprised at the apathy of the Knights outside of the assemblies in this City [New York] . The local assemblies responded nobly to our call. If organizations outside had done as well the result might have been different."

For examples of Brotherhood confidence and claims of financial strength or expectations of generous Knights support, see NYTr, July 18 and 19, 1883; BG, July 14 and 22, 1883; NYT, Aug. 4, 1883.

For Knights expressions of support during the walkout, see NYT, July 28 and 29, 1883; BH, Aug. 3, 1883.

For indications of Brotherhood weakness (tactically and financially) during the strike, see BH, July 12, Aug. 3 and 11, 1883.

For criticism of the Brotherhood for insufficient militancy, see IW, Sept. 1, 1883.

[59]Senate, Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 372, 820; for John Swinton's similar sentiments, see JSP, June 1, 1884.

[60]JUL, Nov. 1882; EA, July 1, 1886; Ware, Labor Movement, p. 129; Robert L. Layton, ("Bob") to Terence V. Powderly (hereafter cited as TVP), Aug. 2, 1883, in PP; TVP to John B. Barnes, Aug. 18, 1883, in PP.

[61]Gilbert Rockwood ("Gil") to TVP, July 10, 1883, PP; TVP to "Bob," Aug. 6, 1883, PP; "Bob" to TVP, Aug. 18, 1883, PP; see also TVP to "Bob," Aug. 8, 1883, PP; and Ware, Labor Movement, pp. 129-130.

"Well," Rockwood wrote Powderly on August 20, "the telegraphers strike is ended. The press of the country will draw long moral lessons for the benefit of workingmen, and yet the same mistakes will be committed again and again." Rockwood also spoke cryptically about a circular related to the strike which he though "emanates from the communistic element in New York and Brooklyn. . . ." Rockwood to TVP, Aug. 20, 1883, PP.

Powderly's personal diary has a large gap between January 26 and August 11, 1883, and the operators are nowhere mentioned. But the Powderly diaries do have gaps elsewhere, too. See PP.

[62]McClelland, more closely associated with the Knights than the Brotherhood leadership, and something of an ideologue, responded to Layton's request that a general assessment be made to help the defeated operators with an acid letter condemning "the d___d asses" who blamed their defeat on the Knights and wanted to leave the Order. As far as aiding the late strikers, McClelland coolly advised Layton to "Go steady on the Telegraphers. A number of victims will be made but they should be looked after individually. . . . I will hold what money I am now receiving as a nucleus of a fund for the relief of worthy victims and am sure they will not be allowed to suffer. Let it wait until I see you in Pittsburgh, about August 30th." The following October, Powderly warned Layton to exercise caution in his dealings with "Mac" because the Order might "suffer through a lack of confidence in him. . . . Some devils are trying to injure your name and his in connection with this telegraph strike but it will not succeed."

In the late 1880s, McClelland became involved in a controversy over the Knights and union labor at the newspaper he edited in his native St. Catherine's, Ontario, and students of the Knights in Canada Kealey and Palmer refer to McClelland's "overbearing character and penchant for intrigue." See EA, July 1, 1886; TVP to "Bob," Oct. 9, 1883, PP; Kealey and Palmer, Dreaming, p. 371.

There is also the matter of whether McClelland did or did not send out the appeal for aid when requested, or whether he was even requested to do so. In this case, it is a matter of taking his word or John Campbell's, and it is difficult to know whom to believe, given the possibility of sincere misunderstandings that may have existed, the Brotherhood's slapdash style of operation, and McClelland's dubious character. For their own briefs in the case, see the Campbell-McClelland exchanges in EA, June 1, 16 and July 1, 1886; for defenses of McClelland also meant to heal old wounds as the revitalized Brotherhood rejoined the Knights, see EA, Aug. 16, 1886.

After the collapse, the Master Workman of the Baltimore LA, H.O. Steltz, wrote Powderly asking for funds for his 29 fellows, stressing the "duty" of the Order to do so (despite what he claimed was Layton's refusal to aid operators) now that the ex-strikers were locked out. Steltz to TVP, Aug. 25, 1883, PP.

[63]See JUL, Sept. 1883; and Ware, Labor Movement, pp. 130-133.

On the structural weakness and inherent problems of what Kealey and Palmer describe as "an international body unable to control effectively its LAs but unwilling

to support them fully in the midst of conflict, see Dreaming, pp. 332, 374; and Fink, Democracy, p. 224.

[64]"Bob" to TVP, Sept. 21, 1883, PP; TVP to J.S. Ryan, Nov. 2, 1883; Robert L. De Akers to TVP, Sept. 3, 1883, PP.

In November, the eminent labor journalist John Swinton, remarking that "new times bring new thoughts," urged the defeated operators to reassess their tactics rather than abandon activism. JSP, Nov. 25, 1883.

[65]Operator, Sept. 1, 1883; NYT, Aug. 19, 1883; TA, Sept. 1, 1883.

[66]JSP, Mar. 23, Apr. 27, June 1, 1884, see also Apr. 6, Aug. 24, Nov. 16, 1884, Jan. 11, 1885.

[67]Operator, July 1, 1884.

The correspondent also called for "conservative leaders" for any new operators' union, and stressed the goal of elevation for any such union.

[68]JSP, Apr. 26, Sept. 6, 1885; Operator, May 15, 1885.

There was also a strike at Buffalo, N.Y., over back pay at about the same time; whether related to the other actions, and what its outcome was is unclear. See New York BLS, Third Annual Report, pp. 206-207, 211.

[69]New York BLS, Third Annual Report, pp. 243, 245; John B. Taltavall, Telegraphers of To-Day (New York, 1893), pp. 273-274; JSP, Aug. 9, 1885.

O'Reilly had been an operator in the British government-run postal telegraph before the Western Union lured him to the United States in 1882 to help set up their Wheatstone system.

[70]JSP, June 27 and July 18, 1886; EA, June 16, Aug. 16, and Oct. 1, 1886, Feb. 16, 1887.

It is not clear whether the revived Brotherhood itself included linemen. The EA piece speaks of their being "thoroughly organized under the auspices of the Knights of Labor. They are also connected with the Union of building trades and Central Labor Union."

Another old Brotherhood activist, Boston's Eugene O'Connor, turned up in 1887 as the local telegraphers' union representative taking part in a Central Labor Union reception for John Swinton. JSP, Apr. 17, 1887.

[71]JSP, Dec. 14, 21, 1884, Sept. 20 and Dec. 27,

1885. See also JSP, Jan. 10, 1886, where after reporting on the recent successful elevated railroad engineers' strike against Gould, the paper declared, "JAY GOULD'S cowed telegraphers have now seen how JAY GOULD'S Elevated engineers 'work the racket.'"

[72]EA, Jan. 1, 16, Oct. 15, 1887; see also EA, Nov. 1, 1887.

An 1888 editorial blamed the lassitude among operators on the unwillingness of the small elite of high-paid telegraphers to make common cause with lower-paid operators whom they saw as a potential corporate wedge against their own relatively privileged position. EA, Mar. 1, 1888.

[73]See, e.g., EA, Nov. 1 and 16, 1886; Jan. 1 and Sept. 1, 1887. The method did evidently achieve what the EA called "minor victories." The use of craft journals in this way had also been promoted in the 1870s (see Note 24 above).

The telegraphic journals also implicitly mirrored the decline of operator unionism and the diminishing attractiveness of the occupation. The independent journals of the 1870s through the late 1880s had contained a mix of craft news and gossip, material on unions and broad reform movements such as the Knights and Single Taxers, as well as technical articles. Though the magazines were aimed at the industry as a whole, their labor and reformist concerns were noteworthy, especially at the time of the Brotherhood's emergence. By the late 1880s, and especially the early 1890s, the journals had discarded the earlier activist interest and become essentially "electric" --compare the titles, for example, of the Telegraphers' Advocate and the Operator of the early 80s with their successors, the Electric Age and Electric World. The later audience sought seems to have been a technical and managerial one, with little if any attention given to operators or unions.

[74]Ulriksson, Telegraphers, Chapts. 5-7.

[75]The official membership tally as of late May 1883 had non-operators as around 9% of the total. Circular, May 20, 1883.

[76]It is worth briefly considering another occupation that first appeared at about the same time--engineering-- and which, like telegraphy, had to define its social and occupational bounds.

In the case of mechanical engineering , a distinctly "professional" culture had emerged by about 1880, when the

American Society of Mechanical Engineers was formed. Mechanical engineers, Monte Calvert notes, were often of middle or upper-class background, likely to pursue careers as entrepreneurs or independent consultants, and their notions of professionalism embraced a sense of collegiality, public service, self-regulation, social exclusiveness, as well as the importance of specialized knowledge and other criteria.

More like the telegraphers were the stationary engineers--those who ran the steam engines powering the ships, locomotives, and factories of the new industrial era. They were usually dependent employees with limited chances for mobility. Like the mechanical engineers, they created a national professional society, but its aims were more to achieve higher status (and bolster the engineers' market power through government licensing) than, as in the case of the mechanical engineers, to preserve an already rarefied position. The ASME, in fact, never deigned to notice the National Association of Stationary Engineers. But the latter was as contemptuous of "rum and trade unions" as the ASME was of stationary engineers. Besides lobbying for license laws, the NASE, Calvert points out, aimed at "developing the moral character, social standing, and intellect of its members, and raising the general level and status of their occupation to at least semiprofessional if not full professional status." This, minus the hostility to unions, resonates with the similar frequent calls by operators for the general elevation of the craft. The special conditions of telegraphy and stationary engineering were significantly different; but their common condition as corporate employees with constricted mobility and their newness as occupations are important, too. See Monte A. Calvert, The Mechanical Engineer in America, 1830-1910 (Baltimore, 1967), pp. xvi, 153, 189 and passim.

[77] EA, Feb. 16, 1887; Operator, Apr. 15, 1881 and July 1, 1884; see also Ch. III above.

[78] See Ch. III above. The matter of a fluid and mobile labor market raises the question of the role of the Brotherhood in dealing with "tramping." The national trade unions that formed in the late 19th century addressed the problem of a national labor market by introducing a regular system of traveling cards to help fellow craftsmen find work (or subsist until they did) and generally provide a network of mutual assistance--as well as to control the flow of workers and thus the craft's wages generally.

In 19th-century Britain, Eric Hobsbawm found national trade unions consciously structuring their "tramping artisan" network to counteract unfavorable job markets or

seasonal fluctuations, and also providing a kind of floating welfare system for unemployed craftsmen.

Telegraphy did have an informal network of mutual help along the national wire-rail grid, no doubt. "Wherever one stopped," Minnie Swan Mitchell reminisced much later, "he (or sometimes she) could find employment, or, barring that, friends." The Brotherhood evidently had a more formal system patterned on the craft union traveling card scheme. Operators leaving their home LA received "transfer cards" which, when they affiliated with a new LA, they surrendered. Additionally, the Brotherhood tried to control the labor market through general advisories to operators seeking work. One Brotherhood circular asked members, in behalf of a railroad operators' LA, not to accept positions on their employers' lines for less than a certain salary.

See Oestreicher, "Solidarity," pp. 120-121; E.J. Hobsbawm, Labouring Men (New York, 1967), pp. 42, 44, 48; Minnie Swan Mitchell, "Lingo of the Telegraph Operators," American Speech, Apr. 1937, p. 155; "Proceedings," p. 8; Circular, May 20, 1883; and on "tramp operators," Ch. III above.

[79] Operator, Apr. 15, 1881, see also June 1, 1875, Sept. 15, 1878, Feb. 15 and Nov. 15, 1879, Feb. 1, 1880; Telegrapher, Sept. 26, 1864, Nov. 1, 1865; TA, June 16, 1883, Oct. 16, 1885; EA, June 16, Oct. 1 and Dec. 16, 1886, July 1, 1887; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 192; North Carolina Bureau of Labor Statistics, Eighth Annual Report (Raleigh, 1894), p. 274; New York BLS, Fourth Annual Report, 1886 (Albany, 1887), pp. 55-57; for ads for "colleges," see, e.g., BH, July 19 and 23, 1883, and JT, Mar. 16, 1881.

[80] Operator, Feb. 15, 1879; North Carolina BLS, Eighth Annual Report, p. 274; TA, May 10, 1883; EA, June 1, 1886; see also June 16, Sept. 1, Oct. 1 and 16, 1886, Feb. 1, 16, Apr. 1, May 2, Aug. 1 and Dec. 16, 1887, Feb. 16, 1888; Operator, May 15 and Aug. 15, 1877, June 15 and Aug. 1, 1879.

[81] EA, June 16, 1887, see also Nov. 1, 1886 and May 16, 1887.

The Cooper Union school began as a quasi-philanthropic program for teaching (largely working class) young women telegraphic skills and placing them within the Western Union system. The EA claimed that the free instruction there legally bound the "girls" who received it to work for the Western Union. See EA, Nov. 1, 1886, and, on the Cooper school, NYT, Mar. 17, 1869; JT, Apr. 15 and May 1, 1868, May 1 and Nov. 1, 1869, Apr. 1 and Dec. 15, 1870,

Oct. 16, 1871; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 886.

[82]The figure of ca. 60 Cooper school graduates in 1883 given by Norvin Green is close to the 55 graduates reported in the 1870-71 session. In the latter, 275 originally applied, from which 96 were selected; of the 55 graduates, 40 were reported as having been placed.

In addition to the Cooper school, the company may have had other similar training programs, though none received the attention and condemnation that the New York facility did. The Oakland, Cal. Western Union office ran some kind of school in 1875, but whether it survived is unclear.

The company's policy seems to have encouraged the apprenticeship of messengers and check-boys and girls within an office, although Colin Fox, a former Assistant Superintendent for the Western Union in Michigan testified in 1884 that the company "generally sent an instructor" to rural districts with no working operator to recruit and train local talent. By the 1910s, when the company was introducing automatic telegraphy run increasingly by women, it did set up formal recruiting and training programs to draw on messengers and check-girls. See Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 886; JT, Oct. 16, 1871; Telegrapher, Mar. 15, 1875; Senate, 48th Congress, First Session, Senate Report 577 (Washington, D.C., 1884), pp. 255-256; Senate, 64th Congress, 1st Session, Senate Document 415, Final Report and Testimony Submitted to Congress by the Commission on Industrial Relations (Washington, 1916), Vol. X, pp. 9320-9321, 9398-9399, 9408-9409, 9415-9416, 9423.

[83]"Proceedings," pp. 11, 24; TA, July 1, 1883; Connecticut Bureau of Labor Statistics, Second Annual Report (Hartford, 1886), p. 75; see also Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 125, 126, 194, 227.

The second Brotherhood's apprenticeship rules may have dropped the brother-sister-son-daughter provision; at least there is no mention of it in an 1886 precis of the union's apprenticeship guidelines. The same also forbids teaching "any person" without the approval of the LA; and it goes on to allow an operator forced by his employer to take on a student (under threats of firing, etc.) to do so but to promptly inform his LA. See New York BLS, Fourth Annual Report, p. 165.

As late as 1907, operators strove to maintain their market power by exercising a monopoly over teaching. The settlement of a strike at the New Orleans office of the Postal Telegraph Co. that year included a ban on the teaching of the craft by the company. Ulriksson, Telegraphers, p. 69.

[84]Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 126, see also p. 227; Telegrapher, Jan. 28, 1871.

Lloyd Ulman notes that craft apprenticeship, under the pressure of industrialization, changed from being the concern of an employer (or master) to that of the employees, through a union's effort to preserve the integrity of a craft and the market power of employees. It is hard to draw an exact parallel in an occupation so young at the time as telegraphy. Telegrapher activists did, of course, concern themselves with ending the unrestricted teaching of the trade, but there had never been a master's (or corporation's) monopoly on passing on Morse, and apprenticeships, except for the Cooper Union school and its commercial imitators, were often a casual affair. Like other unions concerned with controlling apprenticeship, the Brotherhood certainly wished to tighten the labor market and raise the general economic level of the calling, but I also suspect that its concerns with establishing a uniform system of apprenticeship reflected a desire to professionalize telegraphy and institute cultural as well as economic order in the occupation where caprice had dominated before. See Lloyd Ulman, The Rise of the National Trade Union (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), pp. 312-313; and, for the testimony of contemporary craft unionists on apprenticeship in their trades, Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 405-406, 593-596.

[85]Calvert, Mechanical Engineer, pp. 27, 189; BG, Aug. 2, 1883; New York BLS, Sixth Annual Report, 1888 (Albany, 1889), p. 1040; Iowa BLS, Twelfth Report, 1905 (Des Moines, 1907), pp. 193, 200 and Thirteenth Biennial Report, 1906-7 (Des Moines, 1908), p. 253; North Carolina BLS, Eighth Annual Report, p. 274; EA, Feb. 16, 1888.

The plea for licensing in the last-cited source brought a retort from an operator who, pointing to the success of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers in achieving power through strong organization, warned operators off from a dependence on the state--"class legislation is always dangerous to individual liberty, and there are already too many laws upon our statutes [sic] designed to protect the workingman, which, strange to say, do not protect." See EA, Apr. 1, 1888.

A Cincinnati operator called in 1883 for competitive government examinations and a two-year apprenticeship before licensing a "second-class operator" to work for a railroad or telegraph company. But it is the only such argument before the end of the Great Strike that I have found. See TA, July 1, 1883. License demands were much more frequent after the turn of the century among railroad operators.

[86]"Proceedings," p. 17.

"Other telegraphic employees" evidently included chiefs but not messengers or check-boys and girls. During the Great Strike messengers and checks at a few locations spontaneously walked out, but the Brotherhood made it clear that it had nothing to do with their actions. "They can take seats and listen to the declaration of principles," John Mitchell announced at a New York strike rally after about 50 boys had marched in unexpectedly, "that should actuate them when they become men." Some youthful employees aided the Brotherhood during the strike by providing information or refusing strikebreaking duties, but they were not accepted as Brotherhood members. See NYT, July 21 and 22, Aug. 14, 1883; TA, Aug. 1, 1883; NYTr, July 23 and 29, 1883; NYH, July 22, 1883; BH, July 23, 1883; BG, July 21 and 22, 1883. For Western Union clerks joining the strike at Chicago, see BH, July 23, 1883, whose figures, however (500) seem suspiciously large.

[87]EA, Mar. 1, 1887.

[88]Frank Parsons, "The Telegraph Monopoly," Part V, the Arena, May 1896, p. 953; Walter P. Phillips, Sketches Old and New (New York, 1897), p. iv; Operator, Sept. 1, 1882, Feb. 21, 1885; Ella Cheever Thayer, Wired Love (New York, 1879), p. 10.

[89]EA, July 1, 1886; North Carolina BLS, Eighth Annual Report, p. 273; Operator, Sept. 1, 1882, see also Sept. 15, 1874. On the lighter message workload of rural operators, see Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 934; and Senate Report 577 (1884), p. 21.

[90]On the salaries, hours, and poor conditions of railroad operators, see Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 119, 156; NYT, Aug. 3, 1883; Operator, Sept. 15, 1874, Nov. 1, 1881; NYTr, July 15, 1883; and for a somewhat later period, Iowa BLS, Eleventh Biennial Report, 1903-4 (Des Moines, 1905), pp. 385-388, and Twelfth Report, pp. 184-185, 234-235; Ohio BLS, Twenty-Fourth Annual Report (Columbus, 1900), pp. 324-327, 330-331.

[91]EA, July 1, 1886; JT, Feb. 15, 1871; TA, July 1, 1883.

The anonymous correspondent to the TA also noted that he was "interested in other business in this place, which, considering everything, places me in a position of respect and importance." He also claimed that "many others on this road" were "similarly situated." If so, they were probably not typical nationally.

[92]John R. Stilgoe, Metropolitan Corridor (New Haven, 1983), pp. 203-209. "The telegrapher is the largest window through which we view the workings of corporations," a North Carolina operator wrote in 1894. North Carolina BLS, Eighth Annual Report, p. 274.

[93]Circular, May 20, 1883; for similar organizing difficulties, see BG, Aug. 9 and 15, 1883.

[94]SR, July 20, 1883; the Nation, Aug. 9, 1883; BG, Aug. 1 and 15, 1883; BH, July 28, 1883; NYT, Aug. 7, 1883; see also EA, July 1, 1886; NYTr, July 19, 1883; BH, Aug. 2, 1883; NYH, July 19, 1883; CPD, July 25, 1883; BG, July 21, 1883.

To some extent, the weaker militancy would also have applied to small urban branch offices; it was, indeed, on them that the Western Union drew to help break the Great Strike. The greater militancy in the more "industrial" setting of the larger offices is significant.

At the time of the callout of railroad operators, the NYT had John Campbell claiming that most of them were transients with no deep local ties and would thus be likely to join the strike. NYT, Aug. 6, 1883.

[95]Operator, Sept. 15, 1884; EA, Feb. 16, 1887 and May 1, 1888; JSP, May 23 and June 27, 1886; New York BLS, Sixth Annual Report, p. 1040; Ohio BLS, Twenty-Fourth Annual Report, p. 371; North Carolina BLS, Eighth Annual Report, p. 272; Iowa BLS, Eleventh Biennial Report, pp. 192-193, 198-199, 219.

The conservative tenor of the ORT embraced such things as a ban on strikes and, at least in Iowa by 1903-4, the absence of a closed shop demand. The latter is especially instructive when compared with the closed shop demands of other unions in the same report. Most of the traditional blue-collar craft unions reported to the BLS that they did demand the employment of union men only; but the Railway Trainmen, National Association of Letter Carriers, Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, Order of Railway Conductors, United National Association of Post Office Clerks--and the Order of Railway Telegraphers--did not have closed shop provisions. Eleventh Biennial Report, pp. 170-177, 180-181, 194-195.

[96]NYT, July 20, 1883; see also NOP, July 20, 1883, which reported "many" veterans of 1870 choosing the same passive route.

[97]For former NTU or TPL members as managers in 1883,

see Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 199; BG, July 20, 1883; CPD, July 21, 1883; EA, June 16 and Nov. 1, 1886; NYTr, July 26, 1883; Telegrapher, Oct. 16, 1865.

[98]NYT, July 16, 1883; Ch. III above; for the leadership age profile, I averaged Thomas Hughes (25), Eugene O'Connor (34), John B. Taltavall (27), P.J. Tierney (28), John Campbell (35), Harry Orr (30), Mortimer Shaw (30), John Mitchell (33), John McClelland (31), and Frank Phillips (25). See Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 168, 191, 225; BH, July 23, 1883; EA, Nov. 1, 1886; Operator, Apr. 1, 1882.

[99]John B. Taltavall claimed in 1885 that former Brotherhood adherents had "gradually but surely advanced to positions of honor and trust," but gave no specifics. Of those major strikers whose subsequent careers I could trace, John Campbell did rise to a fairly high post; by 1893 he had become a District Superintendent for the principal rival of the Western Union, the Postal Telegraph Co. John McClelland's position as "night agent" of the New York State Associated Press may have been managerial, but this is unclear; in any case he left after four years for a stormy journalistic career in Ontario. Besides the rough similarity in age, another factor--probably of more importance--seems to have been common to the same strike activists: they were highly-skilled operators. See TA, Oct. 16, 1885; Taltavall, Telegraphers of To-Day, pp. 178-179; EA, July 1, 1887.

There is also a small but suggestive bit of evidence that age influenced militancy in a later nationwide operators' strike. A memo prepared for the manager of the Syracuse Western Union office in 1911 listed 18 operators with 10 or more years' service. Of that total, 7 (or 8; it is unclear) joined the general strike of August 1907, and all of the strikers had entered the Western Union as messengers or check-boys between 1890 and 1900; all had been appointed operators between 1893 and 1904. Evidently only one (or two) others with similar backgrounds did not strike. But I should qualify all this by saying that the more militant operators who may have been blacklisted after 1907, and thus missing from this tally, could have been of another generation. See memo, "Respectfully Returned to Manager Bierhardt," in Box 53, WUC.

[100]See Oestreicher, "Solidarity," pp. 27, 46; and on the specific tensions between white and blue-collar workers, Gareth Stedman Jones, "Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870-1900," Journal of Social History, Summer 1974, p. 507.

[101]BG, July 24, 1883.

[102]CPD, July 26 and Aug. 16, 1883; NYT, Aug. 9, 1883; BH, Aug. 16, 1883.

[103]AC, July 28, 1883; NYT, July 31, 1883.

[104]For printer support, see, e.g., BG, July 20, 23 and 24, Aug. 6, 1883; NOP, July 30 and 31, Aug. 2, 1883; NYT, July 22, 23, 28 and 20, Aug. 6 and 12, 1883; CPD, July 26 and 27, 1883; BH, July 26 and Aug. 1, 1883; NYTr, July 27, 1883.

[105]IW, Aug. 18, 1883. For various examples of labor support, see NYTr, July 22, 23 and 28, Aug. 1 and 13, 1883; NYT, Aug. 1, 3, 14 and 16, 1883; BG, July 19, 23, 25, 28, 29 and 30, Aug. 2, 5, 8 and 13, 1883; NOP, July 25 and Aug. 2, 1883; BH, Aug. 13, 1883; CPD, July 19, 24 and 27, Aug. 3, 1883; AC, July 24, 1883; J.F. Busche, Jr. to TVP, Aug. 22, 1883, PP; JUL, Aug. 1883.

The prominent exception to all this solidarity was the behavior of the railroad brotherhoods, and most especially that of the Locomotive Engineers. Up through the callout and subsequent failure to strike of the railroad operators, there were hints and more explicit suggestions that train crews (conductors, firemen, brakemen, and engineers) would join any general walkout of railway operators. The NYT even had John Mitchell and John Campbell openly claiming such potential support. The train crews stayed out of the fight; although there may have been some sympathy among the engineers and others, there was not enough to move their unions, and especially their arch-conservative chief, P.M. Arthur, to extend aid. See NYT, July 28, Aug. 6 and 9, 1883; BG, Aug. 7, 1883; NOP, Aug. 8, 1883.

[106]Ohio BLS, Second Annual Report, 1878 (Columbus, 1879), p. 284; Operator, Sept. 1, 1883.

After the strike, Johnston exhorted operators to abandon "trades-union slang and demagoguery," in particular the word "scab." Operator, Oct. 15, 1883.

For the "gentlemanly" image during the strike, see also NYTr, July 22, 1883; TA, Aug. 16, 1883; NYT, July 25, 1883; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 554. Western Union magnate Russell Sage taunted the operators for "put[ting] themselves on a level with miners and laborers, with the most ignorant men" by striking. NYTr, July 20, 1883.

[107]NYTr, July 20, 1883; NYT, July 20 and 24, 1883;

BET, July 20, 1883.

"The only danger that is feared," a Boston businessman remarked of the Western Union's concerns, "is from the linemen, who may be inclined to be ugly." BG, July 21, 1883.

At the first New York strike meeting, John Mitchell gavelled down a lineman who had proposed a resolution denouncing a Western Union manager, saying that the Brotherhood would not engage in personal abuse of its opponents. NYT, July 20, 1883.

The Western Union's David H. Bates estimated that 800-1,000 linemen had struck across the nation, virtually all of them "in the various large cities." Labor and Capital, Vol. II, p. 55. On the exemplary dedication of the linemen to the Brotherhood's cause, see IW, Aug. 4, 1883; NYTr, July 18, 19, 20 and 21, 1883; BH, Aug. 18, 1883.

[108] NYT, July 21, Aug. 1, 11 and 12, 1883; NYH, Aug. 9, 1883; NYTr, July 23, 1883; BG, Aug. 11, 1883.

In early August, some New York linemen announced a new tactic: they would ask homeowners over whose roofs Western Union wires passed for permission to go up to "legally" cut the trespassing lines. NYTr, Aug. 4, 1883.

[109] NYTr, Aug. 4 and 7, 1883; see also BH, July 22, 1883.

The operators were not themselves without a taint of violence. A woman operator on the Boston & Maine Railroad, a Mrs. Staniford, was evidently the target of intimidation by the Brotherhood because of her hesitance to join the movement; more seriously, there were the alleged assaults on scab operators toward the end of the strike. See BH, July 26 and 27, Aug. 11 and 20, 1883; BG, July 30, 1883; NYT, Aug. 8 and 17, 1883; NYTr, Aug. 8 and 10, 1883; BET, Aug. 8, 1883; NOP, Aug. 16 and 17, 1883.

According to Terence Powderly, a plot (or two plots; it is not clear) existed during the Great Strike to carry out violent sabotage against the Western Union. One (or perhaps both) involved the International Workingmen's Association, one of whose West Coast members tried to get Brotherhood members to commit the unspecified act so as to implicate the operators' union rather than the "Anarchist society." More bizarre yet, a second plot (or perhaps the same one), the former Knights leader claimed, involved a scheme to dynamite a pole carrying trunk lines in front of 195 Broadway. John McClelland got wind of this and told Powderly. Powderly--if he can be believed--eventually foiled the plan by taking the dynamite intended for the job, boarding the Hoboken ferry, and dumping the explosives into the Hudson River. See Powderly,

Thirty Years, pp. 275-276, and, Path I Trod, pp. 109-112.

[110] IW, Aug. 25 and Sept. 1, 1883.
In its post-strike editorial, the World claimed that a "large number of the rank and file of the telegraphers and linemen were ready and anxious to fight the Western Union in a way that would soon bring it to terms." Presumably this was in New York. Perhaps a high percentage of Irish-American operators there and ties to militant Irish nationalism had something to do with this. The Brotherhood leadership, though, clearly opposed the sabotage.

[111] Ibid., Sept. 1 and 15, 1883. Honorius went on to argue a Single Tax line.

[112] BH, Aug. 18, 1883; Terrence Lynch to TVP, Sept. 2, 1883, PP.
It is unclear from Lynch's letter whether he himself was an operator or not. For examples of operator repudiation of the Knights, unions, and their radical implications, see NYH, Aug. 21, 1883; and Operator, Jan. 15, 1884.

[113] NYT, Aug. 20, 1883.
It is worth noting that the operators were not the only white-collar contingent within the Knights; there were at least also retail clerks in the Order.

[114] All sources agree that telegrams were largely confined to the middle and upper-classes. See Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 603, 1073; the Electrical World, Dec. 13, 1890; Senate Report 577, pp. 15-16; Parsons, "Telegraph Monopoly," Arena, Jan. 1896, p. 257. On the Toronto strike, see Kealey and Palmer, Dreaming, p. 120.

[115] TA, Sept. 1, 1883.

[116] Ware, Labor Movement, pp. 128-135; Kealey and Palmer, Dreaming, pp. 67-68, 148, 293, 338; Fink, Democracy, p. 154; Melton Alonza McLaurin, The Knights of Labor in the South (Westport, 1978), pp. 45, 46.

[117] Grob, Workers and Utopia, passim and p. 189. Contra Grob, see Oestreicher, "Solidarity," esp. pp. 320-329; Kealey and Palmer, Dreaming; and Fink, Democracy.

[118] David Lockwood notes that such minimal organization among white-collar employees in Britain as occurred in the 19th century involved those where "greater numbers of clerks were often concentrated in the same establishment"--

in the civil service, railways, banks, insurance houses, and so forth. Lockwood, The Black-Coated Worker (London, 1958), p. 33.

[119]See, e.g., "Proceedings," pp. 10-11; and EA, Feb. 16, 1887; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 236.

In December 1882, Thomas H. Winsor, of the Buffalo Brotherhood, began a letter to Terence Powderly, "Local Assembly No 1926 (Telegraphers) desiring to better their financial condition," and went on to ask the Grand Master Workman to "favor them and others by delivering a good rousing lecture upon Labor" the coming month. Winsor to TVP, Dec. 14, 1882, PP.

On the immediate material gains and market power that "pure-and-simple" unions could provide their members (and so attract and hold them), see Laslett, "Reflections," pp. 635, 647; and Samuel Gompers, Seventy Years of Life and Labor (New York, 1925), Vol. I, p. 83.

[120]TA, June 1, 1883; see also BH, July 18 and 19, 1883, for Western Union claims of operators having been "misled" into joining what they thought was only a friendly society.

[121]Operator, Jan. 15, 1884; Kealey and Palmer, Dreaming, p. 107, 283-289; Oestreicher, "Solidarity," pp. 218-219; BG, July 24 and Aug. 1, 1883.

The Globe also reported that after a local operator had conducted an unauthorized spy mission in the Boston Western Union office (partly as a lark), he was made to stand before his assembled Brothers and Sisters and apologize for the breach of union discipline. BG, July 28, 1883.

[122]Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 236; see also Operator, Jan. 15, 1884; NYH, Aug. 21, 1884.

[123]My conclusions here strongly reflect the insightful interpretations of Kealey and Palmer, Dreaming, pp. 54-55, 96, 396; Fink, Workingmen's Democracy, pp. 6, 9, 10; and Oestreicher, "Solidarity," pp. 213-214, 243-244.

[124]On the eclecticism of the Knights and the labor movement, see Oestreicher, "Solidarity," pp. 173-174, 209, 213-214, 243-244, 320-329; Kealey and Palmer, Dreaming, pp. 137, 166, 396; on the great rise in Knights membership as a weakness, see Oestreicher, "Solidarity," pp. 317-318.

[125]Fink, Democracy, pp. 6, 9, 10; Montgomery, Beyond Equality, pp. 444-445, BH, Aug. 15, 1883.

[126] Operator, May 15, 1882; TA, July 1, 1883 and Oct. 16, 1885; EA, Jan. 16, 1887, see also July 1, 1886; Operator, Apr. 1, 1882.

A paper read before the Boston Brotherhood during the Great Strike spoke of the "moral mortgage" that operators held on the telegraph companies because their labor had underwritten the firms' wealth, and also attacked Social Darwinist apologias for inequality and selfishness. But the paper was also skittish on the question of class conflict, invoking "the grisly phantom of the Commune," and pleading for fair and equal protection for labor as well as capital, for "the rich and well-to-do" to help undo the wrongs of the present system, and for "arbitration" (in our 20th-century sense of the term) between the operators and the Western Union to be carried out by "men of brains and conscience" to settle the Brotherhood's grievances. The paper's author was not identified. It sounds very much like the sort of argument that a Richard Ely would have advanced. See BH, Aug. 10, 1883.

"We seek by organization to make ourselves so powerful," an 1887 Brotherhood circular proclaimed, "that arbitration between our employers and ourselves can be successfully resorted to for protection. . . . " There is a mingling of implied threats and conservatism in this "arbitration" argument that runs through much of the telegrapher union rhetoric. See EA, Feb. 16, 1887; and also Operator, Feb. 21, 1885.

On the Brotherhood's willingness to bargain based on the bill of grievances before the Great Strike, see New York BLS, Third Annual Report, p. 242; EA, June 16, 1886. The usual meaning of the term "arbitration" in the 1880s, I infer, was what is now called "collective bargaining."

After the Great Strike failed, John Mitchell blamed the loss on the Brotherhood's affiliation with an organization that openly encouraged class antagonism. Capitalists who would have otherwise supported the telegraphers, he claimed, held back "because they foresaw in its success a general struggle between employers and employes backed by the Knights of Labor." W.J. Johnston made a similar point five months later. See NYH, Aug. 21, 1883; Operator, Jan. 15, 1884.

[127] EA, Apr. 1, 1887; TA, July 16, 1883.

[128] NYT, July 20, 21, 22 and 24, 1883; CPD, July 19, 1883; BG, July 17, 18 and 22, 1883; BH, July 20 and 24, 1883; NYTr, July 19 and 21, 1883. For similar manager-operator sympathy, see also EA, Nov. 1, 1886, Mar. 1, 1887; and Telegrapher, Dec. 18, 1875, which reprinted a Cincinnati Commercial piece claiming that

superintendents and managers had joined operators in protesting the Western Union's Sliding Scale cuts.

It is unlikely that an operator would have had much, if any, contact with a senior manager (say a District or General Superintendent) although hiring may have been technically done by District Superintendents. As head of the 8th District of the Eastern Division of the Western Union in 1872, D.H. Bates was evidently responsible for hiring operators. See D.H. Bates to H.C. Keyes, Nov. 27, 1872, in Box 48, WUC; and NYTr, Aug. 16, 1883, where Eckert advises those "who are under Superintendents" to apply to them for rehiring.

[129]The JT discouraged gifts and testimonials to superiors unless meant as retirement or farewell tributes (Feb. 1, 1873). For testimonials, gifts, etc., see Operator, Apr. 1 and 15, 1876, Jan. 15, 1877, Nov. 1, 1879 and Jan. 15, 1882; Telegrapher, Dec. 26, 1864, Feb. 27 and Nov. 15, 1865, Dec. 10 and 31, 1870, Jan. 7, Apr. 15 and June 24, 1871; and William J. Dealy to Employes of the General Operating Department, Feb. 22, 1892, in Box 48, WUC.

[130]JT, Apr. 1, 1868, Apr. 15, 1870 and Oct. 15, 1872; Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 941; Operator, Dec. 1, 1874; EA, Oct. 1, 1886, Feb. 2 and Oct. 15, 1887; for a Western Union-sponsored baseball team see TA, June 1, 1883.

Not surprisingly, a good deal of the Western Union's paternalism (such as it was) originated in response to independent organization by operators. The NTU's creation of a mutual insurance plan in 1867 prompted the company to form the Telegraphers' Mutual Benefit Association very soon thereafter; at about the same time, the Western Union house organ's forerunner appeared--ostensibly as an independent journal--to compete with the Telegrapher. See Ulriksson, Telegraphers, p. 19.

In 1872, F.J. Grace, the JT's new editor, noting that the "mass of employes do not exhibit that confidence in the Company which the Company deserve at their hands," invited operators to air their reasonable complaints in the JT's pages (rather than, he implied, independent journals) so that "perhaps, in a friendly way, an apparent wrong might be made right." There is no evidence that any operators took Grace up on his offer--or that if they did he bothered to print their grievances. JT, May 15, 1872.

[131]Telegrapher, Oct. 8 and 29, Dec. 31, 1870; Operator, Dec. 1, 1883.

The Bankers & Brokers plan of 1870 was less the result of magnanimity and paternalism than of straitened

circumstances. The company originally demanded that operators take a 10% pay cut to help it survive; when they refused, the firm countered with an offer of a profit-sharing arrangement (including the right to inspect company books) along with the 10% cut. The company's fortunes evidently improved, but it was reluctant to comply with the open-books pledge, and one operator reported that he thought the company had got the better of the deal. The Bankers & Brokers abandoned the plan in early 1871 and resumed paying fixed salaries.

David Montgomery observes that the tendency of some 19th-century radicals to merge employees and employers together as "producers" (because both were "exploited alike by the financier") not only blurred class lines but the difference "between cooperatives and profit-sharing plans." Beyond Equality, p. 444.

A remarkable and unique bit of welfare capitalism took place in the New York office of the (Gould-controlled) American Union Co. in late 1880 and early 1881. The office manager, William Dealy, to commemorate the facility's first anniversary, allowed the operators to elect from among themselves their Associate Chief Operator. If found competent after a month's trial, the chief-elect would receive an appointment and a $10 raise. The vote resulted in a tie, so Dealy made one man a Second Assistant Chief. He also set up a kind of managerial apprentice program by "allowing a number of his operators to take charge of the office on Sunday, thus giving them an opportunity to acquire practical knowledge that would fit them to become chief operators." This was certainly not workers' control, but it was very sophisticated managerial policy. Except for the troubles of 1883, Dealy was apparently well regarded by subordinates. Operator, Jan. 1 and Feb. 5, 1881.

[132]Ware, Labor Movement, Ch. VII; Kealey and Palmer, Dreaming, p. 111; Oestreicher, "Solidarity," p. 231; Foster Rhea Dulles, Labor in America (New York, 1960), p. 116.

[133]Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 144, 210; see also NYTr, Aug. 18, 1883.

[134]On republicanism and the labor movement, see, e.g., Montgomery, Beyond Equality; Nick Salvatore, Eugene V. Debs, Citizen and Socialist (Urbana, 1982); Oestreicher, "Solidarity"; Alan Dawley, Class and Community (Cambridge, Mass., 1976); Bruce Laurie, Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850 (Philadelphia, 1980); Fink, Democracy, p. 4.

[135]BH, July 29 and Aug. 10, 1883; JSP, Dec. 16, 1883; EA, Oct. 1, 1887; see also Labor and Capital, Vol. I,

pp. 122-123; NYTr, July 21, 1883; BG, Aug. 9, 1883; IW, Aug. 18, 1883; Telegrapher, Feb. 4, 1871; CPD, July 30, 1883.

The republican theme could also be thrown back at the operators. "People talk here of American independence," a lineman disgusted with the Brotherhood's "gentlemanly" tactics told the IW, "but I guess in the country I came from [Ireland, presumably] we would settle the matter very quickly."

The secrecy of the Brotherhood (and the Knights) probably had a faintly un-republican resonance--think of the Antimasonic movement of the 1830s--and union opponents could also trot out the "free-born American citizen" and the abrogation of "personal independence and individual manhood" as the liabilities of telegraph unionism. See IW, Aug. 25, 1883; JT, Jan. 15, 1870; Hampshire Gazette and Northampton Courier, July 24, 1883; and on the secrecy and allegedly undemocratic practices of the Brotherhood, NYT, July 18 and 26, 1883; BH, July 14 and 15, 1883.

[136]Grob, Workers and Utopia, pp. 187-188.

[137]Oestreicher, "Solidarity," pp. 2, 192, 241, 452; Kealey and Palmer, Dreaming, pp. 278-279, 292; Fink, Democracy, pp. 220-221.

Oestreicher notes that, at least among the Detroit workers he studied, the "subculture of opposition" that the Knights represented was not universal--other cultural forces (ethnic, middle-class WASP, etc.) either competed or co-existed with the "subculture," so dividing loyalties.

Without pushing the point too far, the internal judicial structure within the Knights, with its formal proceedings, "judges advocate," and so on, seems to reflect the idea of a "subculture of opposition"--in this case with the existence of an autonomous body of morality and justice among producers. The Brotherhood had a District (Assembly) Court, a Judge Advocate, three judges, and a clerk of the court. "Proceedings," p. 21.

[138]Grob, Workers and Utopia, pp. 44, 47, on Knights Cooperation; see also Ware, Labor Movement, Ch. XIV, who argues that the co-op vision was "archaic" because of the small scale envisioned. The fault in this thesis (forgetting the inherently large size of the telegraphers' plan) is that it assumes that the industrial capitalist models of the Gilded Age were economically (if not morally) "right" and inevitable--a moot point. On scale and productivity, see, e.g., Kirkpatrick Sale, Human Scale (New York, 1980), esp. pp. 310-318.

[139]Telegrapher, Mar. 11, 1871. The plan called for 500 operators to put in $10 a month for 3 years to pool a capital of $180,000, with which they would either buy existing lines or build their own from scratch. Each operator's $360 share was liable to forfeiture if he withdrew.

[140]"Proceedings," p. 22; TA, June 1, 1883. The plan outlined in the editorial was hardly "communistic," though, since it did not mandate equal shareholding.

[141]TA, July 16, 1883; Operator, Nov. 18, 1882. I take the poem to refer to an employee-owned company, although this stanza:

"And furthermore," he [the manager] said, "there's
a provision,
That each employe monthly shall be paid
Ten dollars--stock--insuring his division
Of the returns by which his work are made."

suggests the possibility that the author had a profit-sharing arrangement in mind; the Bankers & Brokers plan of 1870 had used the word "cooperation" in that sense. On the loose distinctions between "cooperative" and profit-sharing in the period, see Montgomery, Beyond Equality, p. 444.

[142]Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 148, 178-179. How democratized McClelland intended the shop floor to be under employee ownership is an open question; he evidently did not envision abandoning some kind of hierarchy.

One correspondent to the Operator, though not calling for a co-op, submitted what he reckoned was the surplus that an operator earned for the company each day. The figures may be dubious, but the attempt to calculate labor's stolen fruits is noteworthy. Operator, Mar. 15, 1882.

[143]Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 214-215.

[144]Ibid., pp. 179, 216, 236. Although he was not representative of most telegraphers (or Knights), McClelland's articulate championing of an alternative to Gilded Age capitalism offers a revealing glimpse of a Knights ideologue.

Like many 19th-century labor radicals, McClelland embraced a "producerist" doctrine that rested on the Labor Theory of Value. In a fascinating colloquy during the Senate Education and Labor Committee's hearings, McClelland repeatedly refused to accept Chairman Henry Blair's premise that a return on invested capital was legitimate. If workers only derived the benefit from a machine that they ran, Blair maintained, it would be just

as unfair as the capitalist retaining all the profit, since "the capitalist constructs the machine, does he not?"

McC: Not at all; it is invented and constructed by labor.

Blair: But the capitalist furnishes the money which pays the wages which the laborer receives while he is constructing the machine.

McC: Yes, but he takes the money in the first place from the laborer.

Similarly, McClelland would not let Senator James George's definition of "capital" go unchallenged. "Modern political economy," he countered, "would call it the unpaid labor of the working people."

McClelland's plan for the state furnishing credit to producer co-ops (rather than a state-socialist model) had syndicalist overtones. Comparing the contemporary order with the cooperative one that McClelland proposed should gradually replace it, Blair asked whether corruption might sharply decline since "it would be more difficult to purchase [i.e., bribe] an entire legislature" than under present conditions. Replied McClelland, "I do not see any necessity for legislatures as they are at present constituted."

See Labor and Capital, Vol. I, pp. 138, 216, 218; for working-class radical theory, see esp. David Montgomery's discussion of Ira Steward in Beyond Equality, pp. 249-260; and Oestreicher, "Solidarity," pp. 324-325, for his discussion of native independent leftists within the Knights, into which category McClelland seems to fall.

[145]BG, July 23, 27, 28 and 29, 1883; NYT, July 27, 28 and 31, 1883.

[146]BG, July 28 and 29, 1883.

There were no interest or dividend payments either, although members had the privilege of $20 worth of free telegrams (presumably per year). Since a membership share was inalienable, it could only be returned "as life insurance to an heir or devisee, with increment in the same ratio to the prosperity of the association at the time of death." As for general oversight, one-third of the Association's Executive Board was to consist of "practical telegraphers."

[147]BG, July 28, 1883; R.H. Ferguson to TVP, July 29, 1883, PP. Ferguson told Powderly that he was a former operator.

[148]Operator, Nov. 15, 1883; NYTr, July 28, 1883; see also SR, July 28, 1883.

A "Citizens' & Telegraphers' National Union Telegram and Cablegram Co." announced, from Boston, that it would begin accepting subscriptions on September 15. The ambitious company was planning a network across the United States and Canada as well as a trans-Atlantic cable, by raising $5 million (at $25 a share). The company was to be less egalitarian than the Association, with stockholding limited to $100,000 per person, but there were remnants of the co-op idea: Six of the directors to be operators (seven to be "citizens"), and all employees stockholders. This scheme, like the Association, never amounted to anything. NOP, Sept. 1, 1883.

The co-op urge did not completely disappear after 1883. As late as 1887, a Brotherhood circular mentioned a co-op scheme as a possible alternative to a postal telegraph. EA, Feb. 16, 1887.

For an earlier comment on the difficulty of raising capital for a co-op, see Telegrapher, Apr. 15, 1871; and on the economic and other woes of Knights co-ops, Ware, Labor Movement, Ch. XIV.

[149]Montgomery, Beyond Equality, p. 432; on the Knights' ambivalence and view of the state as a mediator rather than "ultimate antagonist" or "source of salvation," see Fink, Democracy, pp. 23, 34.

[150]Oestreicher, "Solidarity," p. 231; EA, Apr. 1, 1888, for anti-monopolist sentiments, see also Sept. 1, 1886; and for an earlier view of the state as captive to the interests of capital and thus incapable of passing "impartial laws" (hence the need for a strong operators' union), see Telegrapher, Feb. 4, 1871.

[151]For a paper delivered in Boston during the Great Strike decrying Social Darwinism and its pieties as outmoded and vicious, see BH, Aug. 10, 1883; on the statist strain within the Knights, see Sidney Fine, Laissez Faire and the General-Welfare State (Ann Arbor, 1956), p. 319.

Leon Fink notes that William Appleman Williams has identified a laissez-faire bias in the demands of 19th-century reformers for schemes to socialize the "commercial arteries" (telegraph, railway, telephone) since they served a neutral economic function and should have benefited all; such schemes implied an otherwise private-enterprise economy. Fink disagrees, saying that "it was here [in the commercial arteries] that public authority appeared most badly not only to have sanctioned but also to have colluded with private 'monopoly.'" Perhaps; I lean toward Williams's explanation, although I think a sense of commonwealth was at work, too. So was immediate interest: for shippers, senders of messages, and (as in the case of the telegraphers)

the potential employees of a government utility. See Fink, Democracy, p. 31.

[152] Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 385; EA, Nov. 1, 1886; for support of a government telegraph, see also EA, Sept. 16, 1886; Operator, Jan. 15, 1881, Feb. 21, 1885; for Knights and Socialist Labor Party calls for the same, see EA, Nov. 16, 1886; BH, Aug. 12, 1883; for an editorial suggestion that operators be licensed by the state, see EA, Feb. 16, 1888.

An article in the June 16, 1883 TA gave an unfavorable account of the British government postal telegraph system, stressing its use of "females and youngsters of the schoolboy type."

Not surprisingly, W.J. Johnston's 1881 endorsement of a government telegraph was grudging and tepid. He found its "dangerous doctrines" "a trifle unrepublican" but admitted that a government monopoly, under a strict civil service regimen, was the lesser evil than the Western Union. Ideally, he would have liked adequate competition among private firms.

[153] EA, Oct. 1 and 16, 1886, May 2, 1887; Grob, Workers and Utopia, pp. 86-87, 164-165; Ray Ginger, The Age of Excess (New York, 1965), pp. 59-61, NYT, Sept. 19, 1887.

[154] EA, Nov. 1, 1886.

Although the Single Tax doctrine was a panacea and Henry George firmly wedded to a belief in private enterprise, he was not, as Sidney Fine points out, a simple-minded advocate of laissez-faire. Besides calling for government ownership of natural monopolies, George envisioned a fairly active and rich role for the state, providing "free medical facilities . . . museums, libraries, lecture rooms, music and dance halls, technical schools, theaters, public baths, playgrounds and gymnasiums, and support [for] all forms of intellectual and scientific endeavor." Fine, Laissez Faire, p. 294.

On George's anti-radicalism, see Chester McArthur Destler, American Radicalism, 1865-1901 (New London, 1946), pp. 22-23, 200-201.

[155] EA, Oct. 15, 1887, see also June 1, 16, July 1, 16, Sept. 1 and Oct. 1, 1887.

[156] EA, May 16 and June 1, 1887, see also June 16, July 1 and Sept. 1, 1887.

Delaney used the George campaign to vent his spleen generally against operator activism. He spoke acidly of

the "good generous men" who led the Great Strike, during which they "enjoyed good salaries, had three square meals a day, and grew fat and good natured during our vacation of thirty days." EA, Aug. 1, 1887.

[157]Eric Foner, Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War (New York, 1980), Ch. VIII, passim and pp. 184-189.

[158]IW, Aug. 4, Sept. 1 and 15, 1883.

During the Great Strike, the World spoke of Peter J. Morison, Master Workman of the Brooklyn Brotherhood, as "an old friend of the Irish World's and will be remembered by many of those who took part in the old Fenian movement."

[159]Foner, Politics, p. 194, 198-199; EA, Oct. 15, 1887.

[160]See above, p.262; Oestreicher, "Solidarity," p. 81; and for an expression of the Knights' aims, contemporary with the Great Strike, that mentions education, organization, cooperation, and political action, see AC, Aug. 19, 1883.

C H A P T E R V I

An Age We Do Not Fully Understand

If an anonymous contemporary print is any guide, New York's Broadway was a busy, noisy place in the 1880s. The buildings lining both sides of the cobblestoned street were not tall by 20th-century standards--probably five or six stories high on average--but they were tall enough to make Broadway an urban canyon. Within, sounds of commerce and traffic must have echoed and intermingled: the shouts and whistles of teamsters, the creaking of leather and wood, the ring of metal on stone, the shuffling of pedestrians, the desultory snorts of horses. During business hours the street was packed. In the print's foreground, uniformed messenger boys nip between handcarts and delivery wagons. A bit further down the street, two omnibuses, their drivers shaded by umbrellas, pass each other going in opposite directions. Beyond them, a sluggish stream of carriages and wagons merges and blurs into an uptown vanishing point. And all of this pulling and hauling, lifting and carrying, loading and unloading is accomplished through the exertion and sweat of men and animals. Broadway was a noisy, busy, and probably smelly place.

It was also an unashamedly commercial place. A

jumble of signs and placards attracts the eye as it moves over the street and its double row of facades. Everywhere--vehicles, crates, buildings, sandwich boards--businesses of all kinds announce themselves. A few larger institutions, such as the Astor House and the New York Herald, fly swallow-tailed pennants with their names. Most, though, settle for ordinary signs: S.F. Myers & Co., Watches; Bigley & Conway, Merchant Tailors: Alfred H. Smith & Co., Diamonds; Rogers Peet & Co., Clothiers; Crouch & Fitzgerald, Trunks and Sample Cases. They are mainly small concerns, partnerships or family firms: Link & Conklin, Ostby & Barton, Hamilton & Hamilton, Jr. And they are often vulnerable firms which the bad health of an individual entrepreneur could derange, or an untimely lurch in the market destroy. Perhaps something of the kind had happened to Arnold & Webster, dealers in band rings at 196 Broadway, for, as its sign explained, that partnership was no more, and its successor, Thomas F. Arnold, carried on the trade now.

Two other things strike the viewer of this Broadway scene. Paralleling the facades on both sides of the street, and fully as tall, is a series of poles supporting dense warps of telegraph wire. And on the left, at Number 195, towering above all the offices and lofts, stands an 8-story, brick and granite structure. Its cupola bears the legend "Western Union Telegraph Co."

My point in all this is less descriptive than symbolic. Intentionally or not, this graphic slice of metropolitan life in the 1880s neatly captured the dynamics of a nation in economic and social transition. Goods and people move through the street much as they had for centuries, only as far and as fast as muscle power can take them, while above them copper wires lead to a vast railway grid and carry signals at the speed of light. The crazy-quilt of signs on the building fronts belongs to a world of competitive, entrepreneurial capitalism which a new, large-scale, corporate variant--like the bulking Western Union building in the lithograph--is beginning to overshadow and dominate. The print, in short, is more than a print. It is compelling testimony about its era.

Likewise, the Great Strike of 1883 was more than a strike. It was important in its immediate consequences, of course, but it was equally important for what contemporaries made of it. It focused public attention on the concerns of the Gilded Age. It elicited thought, opinion, and action on the "labor question," the matter of "monopoly," and on the public good within the Good Republic. It forced Americans to look hard at themselves and their society.[1]

Time and again during the Great Strike, observers noted the widespread sympathy and support among the general public for the Brotherhood of Telegraphers. Seldom, if ever, did such a cross-section of American society view a labor dispute as favorably as it did in the summer of 1883. Nor would striking telegraphers ever again enjoy such broad approbation. During a national walkout in 1907 (as in the earlier 1870 episode), few Americans backed the operators. The New York Times, a Brotherhood admirer in 1883, dismissed the 1907 affair as "A Causeless Strike" and ran an editorial cartoon depicting a foolishly grinning operator sawing a limb--in this case a telegraph pole crossarm--out from under himself.[2]

The strikes of 1870 and 1907 had their own peculiar circumstances and historical context that shaped reaction to them, of course, but the contrast with 1883 is still remarkable. When operators left their keys in the Great Strike and filed out into the street, lunch-time business-district crowds cheered and applauded them. Good feelings toward the telegraphers melted bourgeois reserve when several Boston Board of Trade members shouted encouragement to strikers marching past them.[3] Substantial businessmen (often merchants, brokers, or bankers) spoke well of the Brotherhood, at times despite their own misgivings. "I usually have no sympathy with strikes, and

believe trades-unions often do much harm as well as good; but this telegraphers' movement strikes me favorably," declared one Hub broker. He was not unique.[4]

Support for the telegraphers came from other quarters, too. Nationally prominent journals lauded the strikers, frequently adding that a great many Americans felt likewise. Whether the Brotherhood would prevail was uncertain, Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper admitted in late July, but "they certainly would do so if public sympathy decided the issue." The Boston Herald thought that "[t]here probably was never a strike in the history of labor movements in this country where the sentiment of approval among the masses was so universal and pronounced."[5] Public figures who helped shape that mass sentiment also sided with the telegraphers. Labor activists and reformers such as John Swinton, Henry George, Ohio Congressman Martin Foran, Wendell Phillips, and P.J. McGuire added their prestige to the operators' cause.[6] So did the Reverend A. Stewart Walsh of New York's Thirty-Third Street Baptist Church. And so, in a tepid way, did President Chester A. Arthur who, the Atlanta Constitution reported on July 29, "put himself on record on Saturday last in favor of the telegraphers' strike."[7] More forceful and heartfelt in his sympathies was Senator Henry W. Blair of New Hampshire. Blair was conducting Senate hearings on the social and economic consequences of industrial

capitalism in America. He had invited participants in the Great Strike to testify before his committee, and so he and his colleagues were well acquainted with the walkout. After the Western Union had triumphed, Blair, reminding President Norvin Green of his company's great power, the productivity of its plant and operators, "and considering the money that you do make," asked him point-blank, "don't you think that you could afford to give your operators more money?"

Green squirmed, smiling. "Well, that is a question--"

"I have that impression very strongly," Blair cut him off, "and now that you have got your own way about it I wish you would just come up and give those boys more money."

Blair's support was moral and verbal, but the "boys" (and "girls") had also received material backing during their strike. Individuals and organizations gave cash in varying amounts.[9] Other sympathizers helped out with gifts in kind. The owner of Washington's National Hotel opened a suite of rooms to the local Brotherhood to use as a rent-free headquarters. Excursion steamboat owners in several cities provided Brothers and Sisters complimentary respite from the July heat. In Boston, operators skated without charge in the Tremont Rink. Actors, musicians, and impresarios donated time and talent to stage

benefit performances. Combining support for the telegraphers with a passion for the National Game, crowds in Philadelphia, Washington, Boston, and New York paid to watch amateur baseball nines swat and field. Flyers and tickets for the Boston game had come gratis with the best wishes of the printing firm of Wright & Potter. Hops and balls raised money for the operators, too.[10] Less delicately, several New York policemen may have done their bit for the Brotherhood by winking at assaults and intimidation aimed at scabs. "Well," the cop on the beat reportedly told anti-union operators who sought his help, "if you have taken the place of the strikers you must expect this."[11]

One reason that Americans of all classes and regions took so kindly to the telegraphers was the thoroughgoing popular dislike of the Western Union and its Robber Baron directors, and most especially of the man the New York Times called a "pirate" and a "corrupter of public servants"--Jay Gould. Gould's 20 years of stock-jobbing and chicanery, his attempts to control or muzzle the press, and his vast concentration of economic power made him one of the Gilded Age's outstanding public villains. When antimonopolists met in 1881 to protest the latest

and largest Western Union merger, some of them, on hearing Gould's name uttered, responded with hisses and shouted suggestions to "Hang him!" and "Cut his throat!" During the Great Strike, eminent Boston capitalists growled at "Jay Gould and his clique" and wished the operators God-speed. Gould proved a valuable, if unintended, ally of the Brotherhood.[12]

People hated "soulless corporations" as much as they did the men who ran them. The power, reach, arrogance, and impersonality of the Western Union moved public sympathy toward the telegraphers. Summarizing the strike thus far, the Rural New Yorker told readers that "That huge monopoly, the Western Union Telegraph Company, whose lines bind the whole country in a net, is the chief opponent and oppressor of the operatives." The Springfield Republican, despite its neutrality in the contest, accused the corporation of having "lacked philanthropic interest in its force." Wall Streeter Henry Clews called the firm's refusal to deal with its operators "slapping them in the face." Brotherhood demands may not have been entirely justified, noted the Boston Herald, but "the party chiefly responsible" for the trouble was the Western Union.[13] Nor was the company's greed and insolence confined to its employees. The great monopoly, Samuel Rowland told his fellows of the New York Produce Exchange, "tear up our streets, walk through our houses and over

our roofs, and interfere generally with our rights." But merchants and brokers like Rowland less resented the company's intrusions into their domestic sphere than their economic one. Such entrepreneurs used the telegraph extensively to shift goods and credit. The speed and integration of a national wire system enabled them to exploit a continental market, but the Western Union's practical monopoly of the system made them dependents of the corporation. Consequently, the operators' walkout stimulated interest in various schemes to set up telegraph networks outside the grasp of the Western Union. The Merchants' & Telegraphists' co-op had been one such proposal. Others envisioned private lines connecting the mercantile exchanges of the country's commercial centers. "Is it not about time that we got out of the hands of this company and proclaimed our independence?" Theodore Perry asked the members of the New York Produce Exchange. "Year after year we are paying $12,000 to the Western Union for information from other Exchanges." Perry chose not to take the strikers' part. Other businessmen readily did so. Their pro-Brotherhood feelings were the mirror image of their antimonopolism.[14]

Much as the Great Strike coincided with a newly invigorated labor movement in the early 1880s, it likewise merged with a growing campaign to check corporate power and prerogative. Postbellum antimonopolism is

often linked with Midwestern farmer resentment of railway abuses and the subsequent agitation in the 1870s for the so-called Granger Laws to regulate the roads. This was certainly part of the story, but merchants and other commercial shippers were also prey to the exactions of powerful railroads, and so were equally interested--and perhaps even more active--in the struggle to tame the rail corporations. In addition to concerned businessmen, reformers and labor leaders joined in the antimonopoly upsurge. At the National Anti-Monopoly League's first convention in 1881, John Swinton and Social Gospelers R. Heber Newton and Felix Adler joined the likes of New York merchant Francis B. Thurber in shepherding the new movement.[15]

The League, as Lee Benson has pointed out, adumbrated the combined self-interest and reformism that would lead to federal railroad regulation in 1887 with the establishment of the Interstate Commerce Commission, and much of the early antimonopoly agitation did focus on the transportation problem.[16] But League supporters were out gunning for more than just the railroads. L.E. Chittendon, who chaired the League's initial gathering, declared that the group aimed "to oppose the gigantic monopolies that by their management of the railroads and telegraph wires were working ruin to the old-fashioned style of honorable and respected merchants." The telegraph, no less than the railway, was the prototype of the

new corporate enterprise that so angered and frightened antimonopoly crusaders. It had in fact been Gould's consolidation of the Western Union in 1881 that goaded Chittendon and the others into establishing the National Anti-Monopoly League. Within a year, the League's platform embraced civil-service reform, limits on public land sales, postal savings banks, abolition of privately-issued currency--and government ownership of the telegraph. This was quite close to the agenda of the contemporary Knights, Single-Taxers, Greenback-Laborities, and, a decade later, of the Populists. The antimonopoly creed, in short, attracted and bound a number of Gilded Age reform strains.[17]

Like much 19th-century American protest and reform, antimonopolism freely invoked republican rights to make its case. "This monopoly business is a very formidable matter," N.M. Vall told the New York Board of Trade and Transportation following news of Gould's Western Union takeover. "If ever we should have a civil war again it will be between the people fighting for their rights on the one side and corporations on the other." In the antimonopoly lexicon, "the people" was an indeterminate mass of equal citizens, and wealthy merchant and laboring man alike were victims when corporate monsters like the Western Union upset the social balance by trampling on civic rights. Appealing to injured

rights gave the movement strength by summoning the common denominator of American political culture. The various calls for change and reform coalescing around antimonopoly, John Swinton argued in 1883, represented a general drift "toward the practical assertion of those rights of man proclaimed in our revolution, which are now being undermined in an alarming way." Swinton was not one to shy away from questions of class, but he recognized the importance of a coalition approach in attacking corporate power.[18] In the same vein, the merchant activists of the National Anti-Monopoly League worked to broaden their constituency by courting support among unions and labor, and even endorsed a freight handlers' strike in 1882. But antimonopolism was not anticapitalism. "Labor and capital," the League's manifesto declared, were "allies, not enemies--justice for both." "We are not here to fight capital, but to teach it its place," Massachusetts Congressman Patrick A. Collins told a Brotherhood strike rally. And the Commonwealth's Insurance Commissioner, John K. Tarbox, reminded the same gathering that "there should be no quarrel" between labor and capital so long as the latter pursued "its fair and legitimate enterprise." As manufacturers and skilled workers excoriated the parasitic "capitalists" of finance and trade and spoke proudly of themselves as brother "producers," so now "legitimate" capitalists joined hands with workers and farmers and

demanded the destruction of "monopoly" and the restoration of their equal rights. Sincere though they may have been, such professions floated majestically across fundamental social fissures that moved not an inch.[19]

The Western Union's role as model monopoly accounts for a good deal of the public support for the Great Strike, but not all of it. The operators also earned sympathy and respect by their collective behavior. The Brotherhood had acted reasonably and responsibly, noted the New York Herald, walking out only after having "exhausted all the means of peaceful negotiation and given the company fair notice of their intention to strike." And once they did strike, their decorum, in the Boston Globe's eyes, had been "remarkable." Even the hostile New York Tribune conceded that the "unusual measure of public sympathy they have enjoyed, even among people who have generally little patience with trades-unionism," was due to the strikers' "orderly demeanor, sobriety and regard for the rights of property."[20]

Implicitly or explicitly, praising the Brotherhood always meant contrasting the Great Strike with labor activism of the more usual kind. To middle and upper-class onlookers, the telegraphers and their well-mannered proceedings were a refreshing and reassuring change from the scenes of brickbats, bloodied cobblestones, and wavering militia ranks that the word "strike" conjured up.

The late 1870s and early 80s, after all, were the years of a building boom in national guard armories. Recalling the "threats, force, or lawless destruction of property" of the massive railroad strikes of 1877, the New York Tribune grudgingly lauded the operators for having conducted their campaign "more wisely as well as more honorably." Those who favored the Brotherhood often used the same kind of invidious comparisons. "They have not fought like unthinking and blood-shedding communists," judged the Boston Evening Transcript. The membership and actions of the operators' union seemed to exemplify the best of native, republican values. "The telegraphers' organization is not a rabble, led by ignorant demagogues," the Boston Globe declared, "but a body of intelligent men and women who do their own thinking, and, knowing their rights, dare to maintain them." The Springfield Republican was less impressed, though. Among miners, molders, or longshoremen, a labor dispute was tantamount to violence and lawlessness, "but a strike among telegraphers should be orderly and dignified, from the nature of things: few of them can be so dull as not to know that violence hurts a just cause, and it is a questionable compliment," the paper sourly concluded, "to praise them for refraining from it."[21]

There was a good deal of truth, if not generosity, in the Republican's remarks. The operators deliberately acted in such a way as to win broad and well-placed support.

The Brotherhood cautiously gauged the impact of its public statements and actions, before and during the strike, and except for isolated incidents (and the rash of wire cutting by frustrated linemen toward the end) the union maintained its respectable tenor. Speakers at strike meetings who urged "ungentlemanly" tactics found audiences hissing them into silence. Master Workman C.L. Laverty of Philadelphia published a "card" in a Boston paper to deny that the union had been unwilling to bargain with the company. And the Brotherhood had its members ostentatiously renounce drink during the contest. When one St. Louis man tried to have a bottle of whisky brought onto an excursion steamer about to cast off with a load of striking telegraphers, local Brotherhood chief Mortimer Shaw intercepted the boy sent to fetch the contraband. "You and that whisky cannot come on this boat together," he told the youthful courier. "You must either turn that over or stay off the boat." The boy surrendered the bottle, Shaw ceremoniously dropped it into the Mississippi, and the operators left on their abstinent cruise.[22]

Good manners and lemonade boat rides were not, however, simply a matter of tactics and opportunism. As the Springfield Republican had noted, those who worked in offices and wore white collars and cuffs were supposed to be gentlemanly, temperate, property-respecting citizens. Many operators no doubt believed this fervently and

acted accordingly, strike or not. They were middle class and "genteel," and consciously so. Their nebulous and peculiar lower-middle-class position may have made them sometimes too polite and eager to demonstrate their respectability, but the respectability was essentially genuine. "Everything will be quiet and orderly," a Chicago operator predicted on the eve of the Great Strike. "We cannot afford to act otherwise than as gentleman, even were we disposed to do so." But probably few were so disposed. The telegraphers behaved as they did to please themselves as much as to please the frosty Yankees of the Springfield Republican.[23]

Lawful and dignified conduct was not enough to win the operators universal admiration and support. Perhaps most Americans, beyond taking superficial notice of the Great Strike, were simply indifferent to its outcome. Most Americans did not send telegrams. One historian has suggested that the antimonopoly ferment of the period "only affected the day-to-day interests of the masses in a round-about fashion," and in the case of the telegraph, this seems true. "Most Americans" or "the masses" are problematical and elusive groups. The strike's bearing on working-class activism, as I have argued, was a complex

matter, but even most working people were outside the labor movement. And if most people were not fervid unionists committed to wage-worker solidarity, neither were they brokers or merchants who carried out their business through the Western Union. "We did not get the support we had expected," a chagrined John Campbell said after the Great Strike, "and we did not think the public would submit so tamely to the disadvantages attending the suspension of Western Union business. It surprised me." Perhaps it should not have. Many Americans, of all classes, did wish the Brotherhood well and offer it assistance, and this remains a remarkable feature of the Great Strike. But though numerous, they were not typical.[24]

Some viewing the strike found fault with both sides. The Philadelphia Commercial Exchange passed a resolution that characterized the actions of the Brotherhood and the Western Union as "equally reprehensible." Declaring that "Neither party is free from responsibility for the existing state of things," the Boston Journal urged the "duty of compromise" on the contenders. Following a "stormy discussion," a citizens' gathering at the Indianapolis court house resolved that the union and company ought to bargain and quickly reach a settlement.[25] On July 27, another agitated meeting over the strike rocked the walls of the New York Produce Exchange. No sooner had the meeting begun when one member, W.W. Merrill,

"sprang forward with his arms extended a shouted a motion to adjourn." In response, the Tribune's man on the scene recorded, "He was promptly hissed down." Speakers went on to vigorously damn the Western Union, vent general antimonopoly sentiments, suggest that the Exchange acquire its own wire service, and recommend a negotiated settlement of the strike. But when a Mr. Mackey proposed that the Exchange officially endorse the Brotherhood, tempers and voices rose.

"I move," declared Mackey, "that this Exchange expresses its unequivocal sympathy with the strikers."

"No! No!" angry cries from the audience protested.

"There's too much of this monopolizing spirit over the country;" Mackey continued undeterred, "they have the workingman under their heel--"

"Question! Question!" the hostile shouts interrupted him again.

Exhibiting his skill as a diplomat, if not a logician, Exchange President J.H. Harrick tried to soothe the agitated brokers by noting that while a vote of sympathy for the operators was not necessarily improper, it was a matter beyond the scope of the present meeting. And so they adjourned, having put themselves on record in favor of an independent Exchange-owned telegraph. Of official support for the Brotherhood there was not a word.[26]

Sorting out the wrongs and rights of the strike made

some uneasy and ambivalent. A goodly number of bankers and merchants may have found the walkout safe enough to condone, but a strike was always heavy with the implications of social tension and division. Several conservative Protestant churchmen so viewed the operators' battle. In Boston, the Congregational minister William Burnet Wright saw the affair confirming the growing breach between capital and labor. The new industrial order had done away with the "humanizing relations" of the old artisan's shop. "Employers and employed meet on purely commercial ground," he lamented. "Neither side grows into personal relations with the other. The workmen are regarded by the masters as so many producing machines; the masters by the workmen as so many milch cows. It has not yet come to that but is moving fast that way." It was moving fast enough to alarm Dr. Fawcett of Chicago's Grace Methodist Episcopal Church. Taking note of the strike, he preached to his flock on "the natural duties that belonged to those who receive as well as to those who pay the wages--obedience, not servility, sincerity, industry, and honesty on the one side, and moral qualities, kindness, and justice on the other," duties that both sides in the telegraph strike had forsaken. Less equanimous, Dr. Pullman, of the Church of Our Saviour in New York, supported the operators but confessed that he "distrust[ed] the methods they have chosen by which to gain their desire."

Instead, he exhorted workers to join with "the kind of capitalist who earns what he owns by honest work"--"your natural ally, the most perfect friend you have"--and together "make war to the death against the speculative class."[27] The pulpit was not the only source of appeals to paternalism and class harmony. Musing over the strike's failure, the New York World thought that it would "teach prudence to the working classes" and remind capital "to listen courteously and patiently to the complaints of the employes and excite in them a feeling of affection."[28]

The telegraphers elicited straightforward hostility, too. For varying reasons, a number of prominent journals--the New York Tribune, New York Sun, Chicago Tribune, and the Nation among them--opposed the Brotherhood's actions.[29] Some businessmen, in contrast to many of their colleagues, declared themselves foes of the operators' union. At Montreal, the Board of Trade flatly denounced the walkout. The Cotton Exchange of St. Louis went so far as to formally thank the Western Union "for the excellent service it has rendered since the strike," leaving little doubt of where its sympathies lay. Philadelphia's Park Commissioners prohibited a coalition of union men from holding a rally in support of the Brotherhood in Fairmount Park. "The working men are indignant," one paper reported, "and look upon the actions of the Commissioners as another blow at the Sunday liberty of the working classes." It was

a blow at the telegraphers as well.[30]

What accounted for animosity toward the strikers? Part of it had to do with the youth of many operators. If single young men plied a "sedentary occupation" and then complained about its low wages, the Nation argued, few should pity them. Telegraphy was really women's work anyhow, and a healthy buck who insisted on staying at the key and then whined about inadequate salaries was "wanting in energy and pluck, and is probably paid as much as he is worth." "Popular sympathy for the underpaid," the same journal contended, "is reserved for men in families, in callings laboriously acquired through long training, and which cannot be readily changed." The Boston Evening Transcript, although friendly to the operators, agreed that their youth, lesser weight of personal responsibility, and greater ease of turning to another field eroded public support for the Brotherhood.[31]

Opponents also accused the telegraphers of having violated a public trust by quitting their desks. Modern society depended upon such "great public services" as the telegraph, said the Nation. If [s]oldiers cannot strike, nor lawyers, nor doctors, nor ministers, nor clerks, nor farmers," why , as quasi-public servants, should the telegraphers be allowed to do so? The common good came before private gain, whether individual or corporate. Whatever the merits of the operators' case, the New York

Evening Post maintained, no large-scale industrial enterprise such as a telegraph company could afford to forego the hierarchy and discipline upon which it was based. The "fundamental principle of army management is that there can be no division of authority," declared the Post, attacking the Brotherhood's "dictation." Such arguments did not sway all sectors of respectable opinion. The New York Times in turn called the Post's logic an assault on republican values and freedom of contract. Enlistment-like arrangements for corporate employees the Times dismissed as something that "cannot readily be distinguished from slavery."[32]

But it was also possible to turn a defense of free men and free markets against the Brotherhood. To the Hampshire Gazette and Northampton Courier, unions and strikes meant coercion of the "free-born American citizen" and "a kind of dictatorship as bad as the worst kind of monopoly." The Brotherhood's campaign undermined basic individual rights. Mobility and proper remuneration would always reward skill and hard work, explained the Boston Herald, but a strike "benefits only those engaged in it whose abilities are below the average. . . . The leading men in the Western Union Telegraph Company and in railroad and manufacturing pursuits are, almost without an exception, those who have been promoted from the ranks." The Atlanta Constitution admitted that the Western Union

was "a huge, aggressive monopoly" that the people would one day have to tame, but not through unions and strikes, for they, too, violated individual rights. "The relations of a corporation towards its employes [were] those of an individual," and the union's "arbitrary demands" and coercion destroyed those "individual" relations. For laissez-faire-minded critics of the Brotherhood, the operators' best and most natural recourse if unhappy with their present situations was to strike with their feet. Through "the clash of demand and supply," the Nation suggested, both the operators and telegraph companies would learn "what the proper wages of an operator is [sic]. There is no natural rate for telegraphers any more than for bookkeepers or teamsters."[33]

The Great Strike threatened social harmony as much as the balance of market forces. It is quite true that a surprising number of businessmen favored the Brotherhood, but we should qualify such support in two ways. First, as some of them made plain, their backing was as exceptional as the strike itself. The unique circumstances surrounding the Brotherhood and the Western Union's size and avarice probably did not alter their feelings about strikes in general. Second, the specific kind of business in which Brotherhood-supporting entrepreneurs engaged influenced their sympathies too. Contemporary sources leave the impression that merchants, brokers, and bankers

were a majority of the pro-telegrapher businessmen. This makes sense. In addition to their general antimonopolism, such men would likely have had little immediate fear of unions. Their firms, as a rule, were small and had few employees. The corporate revolution had not touched distribution and finance in the 1880s anywhere near the way it had transformed manufacturing, transportation, and communication. A merchant with his force of a few clerks and warehousemen faced a very different labor situation from, say, the master of a textile mill, packing plant, or interstate railroad. In a sense, it was safe for such men to applaud the operators in their battle with the Western Union.

But never entirely safe. A strike still basically involved class conflict, and this had unsettling implications for men of capital. The Nation looked around and discerned "a vast amount of secret but thoroughgoing sympathy with the refusal of the Western Union to treat with 'the Brotherhood'" among the business community despite the huzzahing on State Street and Wall Street. Capitalist support for the striking telegraphers was superficial, for businessmen well knew "that the theories of laborers' rights produced against the monopolists could not, if successful, be confined in their application to monopolists." The Brotherhood's link with the Knights of Labor had excited the same kind of fears. "We ought never to

have been connected with the Order at all," a bitter John Mitchell declared after the strike was lost.

> There were hundreds of men who would have helped us in our fight but for the fact that the movement was connected with all the other labor organizations, and those who employed labor largely declined to countenance our cause because they foresaw in its success a general struggle between employers and employes backed by the Knights of Labor. If we had gone into the fight simply as a body of telegraphers, without any weakening entanglements, I think we would have been much stronger.

The telegraphers' liaison with the Knights, the Operator nodded in agreement early the next year, had "only served to alarm and unite against them the entire labor-employing power of the country," and the New York Times, a Brotherhood supporter, likewise reminded the union that its ties to the Order had alienated many businessmen.[34] John McClelland's testimony before the Senate Education and Labor Committee hearings seemed to confirm the worst fears of conservatives. In acid, the Nation etched a portrait of such activists as McClelland as "fluent men, to whom the strike is interesting mainly as a step toward some form of communism" who misled "the less-skilled laborers" and convinced them of "the iniquity of having any accumulated savings." And beside it the weekly placed another portrait, decidedly more flattering, of "the more highly skilled trades which strike on business principles and for business purposes, and do not bother themselves with

plans for the regeneration of human society." Workers who accepted "Mr. McClelland's crude notions about the government controlling all the industries of the country" were seriously mistaken, warned the New York Herald. Still, the paper reassured itself, "extremely few" working-class Americans shared McClelland's ideas. Perhaps that was so. But it was the troubled present that the Great Strike reflected as much as John McClelland's radical and utopian future that turned those of wealth and property against the telegraphers' cause.[35]

The Great Strike renewed interest in government ownership of the telegraph. The nation's first line of any significance, erected between Baltimore and Washington in 1844, rested upon a federal subsidy of $30,000, an acknowledgement of the experimental medium's "public" nature. Congressional torpor, rather than any widespread and principled opposition to government ownership, soon made telegraph development a private affair. But the idea of a postal telegraph persisted throughout the 19th century, and citizens and legislators wrote and argued about such a scheme with some regularity. House and Senate committees reported on 19 postal telegraph bills before 1900, recommending passage of all but two of the

measures. In 1866--the year of the first of the massive Western Union mergers--Congress made a halting commitment to public telegraphy with a Telegraph Act that offered private companies the use of post roads and federal land (including land grants) over which to build their lines; in return, the government received cheap service and the option of buying out the lines, at a mutually acceptable price, in 1871. It was a foot in the door for proponents of public telegraphy.[36]

It proved a tough door to budge, despite the considerable weight of some of those pushing against it. President Grant's Postmaster General, John A.J. Creswell, favored government wires, as did Thomas L. James, who filled the same post under President Garfield. John Wanamaker, who managed the mails for President Benjamin Harrison, proposed a quasi-public system of telegraph.[37] Agitation for government ownership continued through the 1890s, with reformers such as Henry George and academics such as Richard T. Ely and Frank Parsons advancing briefs for the plan.[38] Their efforts were insufficient to move Congress, though, and the United States never got a government telegraph. Part of the reason was the brisk lobbying against the proposals that the Western Union began in the late 1860s, a tactic that the company augmented by liberally dispensing telegraph franks to influential politicians.[39] The indifference of many Americans

and their representatives to the question also helped to keep the wires in private hands.[40]

But even indifference yielded to the excitement of the Great Strike, if only temporarily. The operators' fight once more made the government telegraph idea a subject of lively public interest and discussion. In truth, the latest campaign for a postal telegraph had really begun amid the ferment of 1881-2, when the National Anti-Monopoly League formed in response to the Western Union's most recent--and alarming--consolidation. The League had adopted postal telegraphy as one of its goals by 1882, the same year in which the New York Board of Trade and Transportation passed a resolution that pointed with meaningful envy to the British government's nationalized wire network.[41] Events in the summer of 1883 sharply accelerated all this. Arguments for and against the plan enlivened editorial pages, legislative hearings, and other public and private forums.

Opponents of a state-run telegraph called the idea a threat to the integrity of a republican society. It would mean a bloated and profligate bureaucracy, a riot of patronage and corruption, and an ill-managed system. What's more, the centralizing tendency inherent in a postal telegraph led in an ominous direction. Start with the telegraph, warned the Boston Globe, and then "how long until there would be propositions for the government

to assume control of the railroads?" "Let England control the telegraph and forcibly stifle discontent;" a reader of the Operator wrote, "let Germany control the railroads and the telegraph, yea even the supply of pork, but in the thousands fleeing, especially from the latter country, let us take heed, and decide this and all other questions not according to European methods, but according to United States methods and the genius of our institutions, as founded by the Fathers of the Republic." Not federal ownership, but the free play of the market, or at most, legislative sanctions of some kind, would discipline telegraphy.[42]

Pristine republicanism and a belief in laissez-faire did not always mean opposition to postal telegraphy. The Nation, exemplar of 19th-century liberalism in its American guise, came out for government ownership. Like the mails, the telegraph lay in an eminently public domain. Private telegraph companies ran their lines to "pay ex- expenses or make profits," not to "serve the popular convenience." A public system, on the other hand, would look to the latter. As for patronage and corruption, the problem was not one of government ownership but civil service reform. Another free-market devotee, the Atlanta Constitution, agreed that public telegraphy would do more good than harm. "The truth is," it explained, "a government postal telegraph would not only increase the efficiency

of the postal service, but would effectually dispose of one of the most dangerous monopolies the country has ever seen."[43] A wide range of conservative voices--including those professing either neutrality or hostility toward the Brotherhood--joined in calling for a government telegraph of some kind, often noting the parallel with the mails in their arguments. "The business of telegraphy is too vast, and its prompt and efficient transaction of too vital an interest to the community," a leading Boston broker remarked, "to be entrusted to a monopoly which must conduct it on purely a money-making basis." Self-interest, especially within the business community, was clearly important in this talk about the limits of private gain and the scope of the public sphere; the same broker would have been far less enthusiastic about a proposal by farmers or consumers to set up a government-run, non-profit corporation to deal in agricultural commodities.[44]

Businessmen were not the only advocates of postal telegraphy, of course. By the early 1880s the demand was a staple of most labor and reform platforms (and by the early 90s virtually all of them). But the variation among the government telegraphy proposals was as important as their consensusaround some kind of statist solution. John McClelland's syndicalist "cooperative" vision was very different from John Wanamaker's subcontracting plan; John Swinton's technocratic system under an "Engineer Bureau,"

or the Socialist Labor Party's call for outright nationalization of an "irresponsible monopoly" were markedly removed from John Sherman's suggestions that the government enter telegraphy to restore competition to the field.[45] It also bears repeating that the peculiar nature of both telegraphy and the Western Union had much to do with the agreement that bound such disparate postal telegraphy supporters. Still, the Great Strike and its revival of the question compelled many Americans to examine their beliefs about the line dividing public from private, and right from privilege. The Western Union was undeniably a product of 19th-century American capitalism. About it lingered many of the economic and cultural assumptions of that same capitalism, even though it was itself changing the realities that had originally created those assumptions. To a degree, questioning the legitimacy of the Western Union as a private enterprise was questioning the legitimacy of private enterprise in general. I would not push the point too far; the Great Strike did not make a collectivist of John Sherman or E.L. Godkin. But the Nation's deviation from rigid laissez-faire in the case of the telegraph, however mild, was significant. Mild assaults on orthodoxy sometimes lead to much stronger ones.

"We are drifting into an age we do not fully understand," the Baptist cleric A. Stewart Walsh told his congregants in August 1883.[46] Much indeed had changed in the United States since the antebellum beginnings of an industrial revolution, and much was changing still. For contemporaries, the scope and quality of this transformation were at times elusive. But there could be moments of epiphany and clarity, too. The Great Strike, resonant with the fundamentals of epochal change, prompted some Americans--Walsh among them--to reflect on the often troubled economic and social currents running through their era, and on the shape of things to come.

The "labor question" bulked large in this self-scrutiny. Widespread sympathy for the Brotherhood had a corollary: It was fair and just that all laboring men and women have the right to combine for self-protection and, if necessary, to strike. It was not only fair and just; it was natural. "Strikes sometimes do harm," Reverend Walsh noted, quickly adding, "So does a thunderstorm, but the air is purified." The Boston Evening Transcript saw the broad support for the Brotherhood as a sign of a remarkable change in popular values: "As a people, we are very slowly advancing to the point where dealings with laborers of any kind, manual or mental, are looked upon as subject to different laws than are recognized as governing transactions in merchandise"--sentiments

that would not become national policy until the Clayton Antitrust Act 31 years later. But they did mark a rejection of the moral calculus of the Manchester School.[47]

Those favoring labor's right to organize did not argue solely from altruism. Worker organization and self-reliance were but a logical extension of republican "manliness" and independence. Apologies for business domination, noted the Transcript, rested on the "Old-World notion that the employer and the capitalist are the guardians of the laborer's interests and the trustees of his wages." But such paternalism ill-suited republican citizens. "The American idea is, in fact, as we see from this 'uprising' of sympathy [for the Brotherhood] . . . that those interests are, in truth, only secured when placed in his [the laborer's] keeping." What's more, cries from conservative ideologues and Western Union partisans of trade-union coercion and combination were hypocritical. "A denial of the right of associated action," the Springfield Republican thought, "comes with ill grace from an employer who has acquired a monopoly of one field to such an extent as practically to control wages within that field." Nor did the Atlanta Constitution's tortured logic that the "relations of a corporation towards its employes are those of an individual" convince supporters of union rights--including those adhering to laissez-faire principles.[48]

Laissez-faire itself seemed less than the immutable truth that mid-century political economy had once pronounced it to be. The huge concentration of capital that the Western Union represented, and the huge body of telegraphers in the Brotherhood that mirrored that corporate structure augured the decline of the face-to-face world of independent craftsmen and merchants. And with it, the warmth--or at least the paternalism--of the small-scale workplace was declining too.[49] In its stead an industrial order based on rationalized mass organization, efficiency, and intricate hierarchy was forming. A new order had new imperatives. Because of the unprecedented size of modern corporations, the New York Evening Post argued, it was "absurd to try to apply rules derived from the petty disputes of factories or workshops employing a few dozen or a few hundred hands." Only by military-style discipline could such enterprises function smoothly. Unions fostered a "division of authority" within the companies, and so the Post unconditionally opposed them. But one sophisticated business journal favored them, explaining that the "path to orderly progress in industry and commerce to-day lies in the direction of a more thorough organization of labor." Unions could serve that end. "Through a recognition of the Brotherhood," Bradstreet's believed, "the morale and discipline of the operators might have been improved in various ways, which would directly further the interests

of the company." Sharply differing over the legitimacy of the Brotherhood, Bradstreet's and the Evening Post nevertheless both stressed the centrality of bigness and organization in the coming economy. So did the labor editor John Swinton. "I like the bonanza firms, and wish they were ten times larger," he told a Senate inquiry. "The whole tendency of science and mechanism is towards the economy of force; towards concentrated action."[50] The Great Strike, if nothing else, had been a model of concentrated action.

Narrowing of skill and function, too, marked the new order that the strike symbolized. It was "an age of specialists," Stewart Walsh declared, in which "the man who becomes expert in any business or profession is practically tied to it," "a living machine, fixed to one shop for life," and not, as previously, free to pick up and leave his trade for another and better one.[51]

An economy and society no longer exclusively ruled by the free play of market forces had also outgrown an ideology that justified and celebrated raw individualism. Reminding a Brotherhood audience in Boston that the legal and moral rejection of chattel slavery had occurred only within the preceding generation, an anonymous speaker predicted that likewise, in the generation to come, all Americans will have shed the archaic and vicious tenets of Social Darwinism. "At present," he said, "there is a

fixed idea that the struggle for existence necessarily evolves [sic] hardship; the weak must inevitably be trampled down, and there is no use in trying to help them up. Every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost is accepted as the ruling principle." But what, in the coming enlightened industrial age, would replace this enshrined selfishness? Certainly not class struggle, with its "grisly phantom of the Commune and the people's 'day of wrath.'" Workers, of course, had every right to organize to defend their just rewards since they held a "moral mortgage" on such enterprises as the Western Union, whose wealth they created. But the workers could not act alone. "Patriots, statesmen and Christians" of all classes would have to join with them in forging a harmonious industrial society. Disputes between labor and capital demanded the intervention of arbitrators, "men of brains and conscience," whose purview would "embrace the entire relations between the parties and the question at issue."[52]

Contrasted with the ugliness of the Spencerian jungle, such a vision in 1883 was progressive. Indeed, it was quite Progressive. John Commons or John Peter Altgeld or Richard Ely or Hazen Pingree or Jane Addams could easily have said much the same thing. Not that the Great Strike created the New Economics or the Social Gospel that were coalescing into what Sidney Fine called "general-welfare state" liberalism--the complex of theory

and values that embraced an active, regulatory state, a legitimate (if junior) place for organized labor within the higher circles of responsible businessmen and technocratic stewards, and the retention of an essentially privately-owned corporate economy.[53] But the strike did give editors, clerics, and businessmen reason to pause, ponder, and dissect the changing America of which they were part, and some of their analyses and prescriptions foreshadowed the "search for order" of a new breed of liberal reformer.[54]

Reverend Walsh had been too modest. If he and others like him did not fully understand their age, their perceptions were at times nonetheless keen. Still, social origins shaped their judgments as much as intelligent and inquiring minds. The middle or upper-class reformer's notion of a classless public good was at once sincere, plausible, and deceptive. It was most sincere and plausible when something like a Western Union outraged it and a "genteel" body of employees such as the Brotherhood struck. And it was deceptive, because it shunted to one side questions of class, wealth and power throughout society as a whole. The public good was one thing when merchants and operators demanded a government telegraph; it was something else again when miners or mill workers glared at bosses over national guard bayonets. Both involved a challenge to property rights; only the latter involved class conflict in the fullest sense. Responses

to the Great Strike suggested a reform liberalism that would be flexible and resourceful, buffering the sharpest jolts of a potent and eccentric engine called industrial capitalism. That would be its genius. Its enduring culpability would lie in its failure to ask whether another engine might better serve society.[55]

N O T E S

[1]By "public," I am essentially referring to articulate, middle and upper-class opinion. This hardly comprised the whole public, though it was an influential part of it. I confine the "public" label largely to these people because a) they were the editors and letter-writers of major national journals, and so their opinion and comment are fairly accessible; and b) I have dealt with the matter of working-class sentiment and the strike in Chapter V. Still, my generalization about "public opinion" must always be qualified by my narrowed focus here.

[2]On the 1870 strike, see Ch. V above, and JT, Jan. 15, 1870. For 1907, see NYT, Aug. 14 and 18, 1907, see also Aug. 16 and 17, 1907; for President Theodore Roosevelt's refusal to arbitrate as he had in the 1902 coal strike, see NYT, Aug. 15, 1907. For support for the walkout by the socialist activist Rose Pastor Stokes, see NYT, Aug. 25 and 26, 1907.

[3]BH, July 20, 1883; BG, July 19, 1883.
Not all stolid Bostonians were so moved. Invited to address a Brotherhood support meeting in August, Henry Cabot Lodge pleaded a prior commitment, and sent an antiseptically-worded note expressing his "personal sympathy in every legitimate effort made by men of training and character to obtain a proper remuneration for their services, instead of wages which are manifestly inadequate and unfair." BG, Aug. 15, 1883.

[4]BG, July 18 and 19, 1883; BH, July 25, 1883; see also NYTr, July 28, 1883.
Some less reputable capitalists expressed support for the operators as well. Banker and Wall Street "operator" Henry Clews said that the Western Union should have treated with the Brotherhood, and the speculator "Uncle Rufus" Hatch thought the telegraphers' demands "fair and reasonable." Hatch, it is worth noting, had been mauled by fellow stock-jobber Jay Gould more than once. See St. Louis Post-Dispatch, July 25, 1883 (hereafter cited as SLPD); NYT, July 23, 1883; Julius Grodinsky, Jay Gould (Philadelphia, 1957), p. 283.

[5]Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, July 28, 1883; BH, July 23, 1883; see also Leslie's, Aug. 4, 1883; BET, July 20, 1883; CPD, July 25, 1883; NOP, Aug. 18, 1883; SR,

July 22 and Aug. 6, 1883; Harper's Weekly, Aug. 18, 1883; NYT, July 21 and 23, 1883; TA, Aug. 1, 1883; BG, July 21 and Aug. 3, 1883; NYTr, July 25, 29 and Aug. 8, 1883.

On July 25, the Albany Brotherhood passed a resolution thanking the NYT for the "spirit of fairness" and "moral support" of its editorial comment. NYT, July 26, 1883.

[6]NYTr, July 29, 1883; BG, July 21 and Aug. 15, 1883; CPD, July 21 and 31, 1883.

[7]NYH, Aug. 20, 1883; AC, July 29, 1883.

Arthur's "support" consisted of asking the two White House telegraphers whether they were on strike, and when they replied that they were not, and were satisfied with their pay, assuring them that he would have raised their salaries if they had thought themselves ill-paid, and that in any case he "favored proper wages for all skilled labor."

[8]Senate, Report of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital (Washington, 1885), Vol. I, p. 891.

[9]The many contributions were obviously never sufficient to tide the operators over for the month-long contest. The Brotherhood compounded this problem by its overconfidence and shoddy management, of course, but I think that a good deal more money was pledged (or reported in the press as pledged) than was actually given. Like the co-op telegraph scheme, this probably reflected initial enthusiasm and subsequent back-tracking by supporters, especially by businessmen. Offers of money from the latter, in the early weeks of the strike, were frequent and vigorous. Perhaps they were sincere as well, although they never amounted to much in fact. Some of the reports were clearly exaggerated or preposterous, such as the claim of Chicago's Master Workman A. J. Morris that the city's Board of Trade had subscribed $10,000 to help the cause. For contributions, see BG, July 22 and 29, 1883; NYT, July 24, 27, 28, Aug. 4 and 9, 1883; NOP, July 24 and 28, 1883; CPD, July 20, 1883; TA, Aug. 16, 1883; BH, July 25, 1883.

[10]NOP, July 22, 31 and Aug. 2, 1883; BG, July 19, 23, 27, 28, 31, Aug. 4, 5, 8 and 17, 1883; NYT, July 23, 26, 31, Aug. 8, 9 and 18, 1883; BH, July 26 and 29, 1883; CPD, Aug. 9, 1883; AC, July 29 and Aug. 2, 1883; BET, July 27 and 28, 1883.

[11]NYTr, Aug. 8 and 9, 1883.

The story is suspect, partly because it ran in the Tribune, a paper opposed to the strike, and partly because even the Tribune's reportage used the qualifying phrase "is said to have." The account also had the precinct commander, Captain Berghold, telling the assault victims who had turned to him for redress "that if the assailants were on the east side of Broadway he had no jurisdiction in the case." One more thing: Berghold was clearly not Irish, but many policemen were, and the Tribune's bias notwithstanding, the idea that they may have acquiesced in Brotherhood violence (remembering the lineman-Fenian link that I suggested in Ch. V) is plausible indeed. Another incident preceding this one involved linemen blocking a non-striking foreman from erecting a pole, which harassment reportedly included police collusion.

[12]Matthew Josephson, The Robber Barons (New York, 1934), p. 210 and passim; Grodinsky, Jay Gould, p. 320; Senate, Labor and Capital, Vol. I, p. 485; Lee Benson, Merchants, Farmers and Railroads (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 178-179, 183; Alvin F. Harlow, Old Wires and New Waves (New York, 1936), p. 414, Gregory S. Kealey and Brian D. Palmer, Dreaming of What Might Be (Cambridge, Eng., 1982), p. 338; NYT, Aug. 3 and 9, 1883; BG, July 20, 1883.

For widespread popular support for the strikers on Gould's western railway system in 1886, see Matthew Josephson, The Politicos (New York, 1938), p. 387.

In addition to Gould and the Western Union directors, there were at least two managerial figures who earned opprobrium: General Eckert, of course, and District Superintendent John E. Zeublin. See BH, July 24, 1883; NOP, July 30, 1883; BG, July 31, 1883.

[13]Rural New Yorker, July 28, 1883; SR, July 20, 1883; SLPD, July 25, 1883; BG, July 20, 1883, see also July 19, Aug. 6 and 17, 1883; NYTr, July 28, 1883.

[14]NYTr, July 28, 1883; NYT, July 27 and 31, 1883; BG, July 27, 1883; see also NYT, Jan. 29, 1881.

During the strike, merchants and brokers also tried to use the courts to attack the Western Union. Suits filed rested on breach of contract (for failing to transmit messages during the strike) and on a Pennsylvania antimonopoly statute. Neither succeeded, evidently. See NYT, July 28, Aug. 8 and 9, 1883; NYTr, Aug. 15, 1883.

For similar widespread support for a strike against an arrogant corporation seen as abusing its public trust (in this case a Detroit streetcar company in 1891), see Melvin G. Holli, Reform in Detroit (New York, 1969), pp. 37-41.

[15]Chester M. Destler, American Radicalism, 1865-1901 (New London, 1946), p. 4; Sidney Fine, Laissez-Faire and the General Welfare State (Ann Arbor, 1956), p. 109; Benson, Merchants, pp. 109-110, 150-151, 153, 175.

The railroads were not passive spectators, of course; on their role in reform and regulation, especially in the later phase of antimonopoly agitation that led to the creation of the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1887, see Gabriel Kolko, Railroads and Regulation (Princeton, 1965).

[16]Benson, Merchants, p. 153 and passim; see also Kolko, Railroads.

[17]NYT, Jan. 29, 1881; Grodinsky, Gould, p. 282; Benson, Merchants, pp. 176-177.

In July 1883, the League was reorganized in Chicago as the National Anti-Monopoly Organization. Its platform, now more markedly shaped by Midwestern reformers and agrarians than the League had been, moved left to include a call for a ban on speculation in commodities, a graduated income tax, and direct election of senators, the president, and vice-president. Benson, Merchants, pp. 196-197.

In addition to the Western Union's overweening market power, the mercantile community also objected to the inflated rates they expected to have to pay to subsidize dividends on the corporation's watered stock.

[18]NYT, Jan. 29, 1881; Benson, Merchants, pp. 199-200; see also IW, Aug. 4, 1883.

[19]Benson, Merchants, pp. 151, 176-177; BG, Aug. 15, 1883; see also Destler, American Radicalism, pp. 25-26, 28.

On cross-class support for an 1891 Detroit streetcar strike based on convergent, rather than identical interests, see Richard J. Oestreicher, "Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875-1900," unpub. ms., p. 407.

Benson notes that the League's appeal to labor lost it support among the more conservative merchants and farmers. He also makes a clear distinction between the antimonopoly left of John Swinton et al, and the business wing that sought much more limited goals. Merchants, pp. 199-200.

Benson casts the antimonopolists as essentially reactionaries who sought to reconstitute the laissez-faire world of Jacksonian America (along with its republican equality and class harmony) that the "Communication Revolution" and corporate growth were destroying. I think he is partly right, but there is an ambivalence in these

men and what they are doing that he does not stress. He does imply it, since the antimonopolists (especially the businessmen) were, he notes, "stand[ing] Jacksonian and Loco-Foco laissez-faire political economy on its head" by invoking the power of government to re-establish a free and fair field. This was at the least a paradoxical development, and one that, whatever its intent, was not in fact reactionary. Additionally, the non-railroad items such as postal savings, civil service reform, government telegraphs, and later, income tax and direct democracy measures, are an important development that Benson inexplicably slights. Something very important is going on here and it is in no way a throwback. It almost seems as if Benson has uncovered this significant turn of events in spite of himself. See Merchants, p. 151.

[20]BG, July 20 and 22, 1883; NYTr, Aug. 10, 1883; see also NYT, July 28 and 30, 1883; BG, July 23, 1883.

[21]NYTr, July 21, 1883; BET, Aug. 4, 1883, BG, Aug. 5, 1883; SR, Aug. 19, 1883; see also BG, July 29, 1883; July 21, Aug. 14, 1883; Harper's Weekly, Aug. 18, 1883; BET, July 21, 1883.

In lauding the Brotherhood, the New York correspondent of the BET wrote hopefully that "a remarkable war is going on--full of meaning for the future of our country--without any apparent sign of warfare. Surely, republican civilization is doing much for us."

[22]BG, July 16, 1883; NYT, July 18, 21, 22, 1883; BH, July 26, 1883; SLPD, July 25, 1883.

In August, the Boston Brotherhood evidently toyed with the idea of approaching property owners to whose buildings Western Union lines were attached and asking that they demand that the Company remove the wires. The plan never amounted to anything, but this stress on property rights and legality seems to reinforce the point about their studied conservatism in managing the strike. See BH, Aug. 8, 1883.

On the other hand, the BH also reported that Eugene O'Connor had threatened to call out the Associated Press operators "unless the papers championed their cause." The charge seems a bit dubious, though. BH, July 24, 1883.

[23]NYT, July 18, 1883; and, on the operators' "gentility" and lower-middle-class position, see Ch. III above.

[24]Benson, Merchants, p. 171; BG, Aug. 19, 1883; see also NOP, July 26, 1883; and the July 23 London Times

editorial quoted in NOP, Aug. 4, 1883. A CPD column (July 28, 1883) noted that the constant coverage of the strike story was beginning to bore many newspaper readers who craved the entertainment value of fresh news.

[25]NOP, July 27 and 29, 1883; NYTr, July 29, 1883; BG, July 20, 1883, for Massachusetts Governor Ben Butler's sidestepping the issue, see Aug. 14, 1883.

[26]NYTr, July 28, 1883.

There were pro-operator speeches that the audience applauded during the session, though. For a similar instance of the Baltimore Corn and Flour Exchange refusing to commit itself, see BET, Aug. 1, 1883.

[27]BET, July 23, 1883; NYT, Aug. 6, 1883; NYTr, July 30, 1883.

For roughly contemporary examples of socially conservative Protestant thought, especially regarding labor and paternalism, see Fine, Laissez-Faire, pp. 121-124.

[28]Quoted in BET, Aug. 18, 1883.

[29]TA, Aug. 1, 1883; BH, July 26, 1883; BG, July 20, 1883; NYTr, July 20 and 21, 1883.

The TA attributed the NYTr's stance to its ownership by D.O. Mills, "a director of the monopoly," that of the New York Mail and Express to ownership by Western Union board member Cyrus Field, and of the Commercial Advertizer to its connection with Roscoe Conkling, whom it called a Western Union attorney. The Sun's Charles A. Dana, who had initially favored the Brotherhood, then "turned [in] to a mild friend of the company," the TA claimed, because of a visit to Dana by General Eckert. Mills may well have been the reason for the NYTr's anti-Brotherhood line, but he was not a Western Union director at the time. See BH, July 26, 1883; and E.B. Grant, The Western Union Telegraph Company: Its Past, Present and Future (New York, 1883), p. 54.

[30]BET, July 25, 1883; NYT, Aug. 1 and 6, 1883.

[31]Nation, Aug. 23, 1883; BET, Aug. 15, 1883; see also BH, Aug. 19, 1883.

[32]Nation, July 19, 26, Aug. 9, 1883; NYT, Aug. 9, 1883.

Both hostile editorials allowed that there was a place for settling grievances of employees. The Nation spoke of "arbitration or legislation providing for compulsory arbitration," and the Post, more vaguely, of

"careful legislation." Another conservative opponent of the strike, Rev. J.E. Searles of New York's Willett Street Methodist Episcopal Church, told his congregation that, in addition to letting the free market settle things, the legislature might set up a board of arbitration. NYTr, July 30, 1883.

The Nation, either supremely naive or supremely disingenuous, also demanded that at a minimum the strikers give adequate notice of their intention to quit so that their places could be filled and the public spared inconvenience.

[33]Hampshire Gazette and Northampton Courier, July 24 and Aug. 21, 1883; BH, Aug. 14, 1883; AC, Aug. 4 and 18, 1883; Nation, July 19, 1883; see also BH, Aug. 19, 1883; NYTr, July 30, 1883; and NYH, Aug. 16, 1883, which, although not anti-Brotherhood or anti-union, opposed the closed shop, said ironclad oaths were legitimate, and invoked a free-market solution to the operators' problems.

The Brotherhood's secrecy may have reinforced its "unrepublican" aura among its enemies.

[34]Nation, Aug. 9 and 23, 1883; NYH, Aug. 21, 1883; Operator, Jan. 15, 1884; NYT, Aug. 17, 1883.

During the strike, while continuing its support, the Times warned the Brotherhood not to solicit sympathy strikes, especially from the railroad operators and locomotive engineers who, it argued, did not share the union's grievances. "To call them out now would savor of compulsion, and we earnestly advise the Brotherhood of Telegraphers to avoid every form of trades-union tyranny." NYT, Aug. 7, 1883.

[35]Nation, Aug. 23, 1883; NYH, Aug. 16, 1883.

[36]NYT, Aug. 18, 1883; Herman E. Krooss, American Economic Development (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), p. 329; Harlow, Old Wires, pp. 338-339; Lester G. Lindley, The Constitution Faces Technology: The Relationship of the National Government to the Telegraph, 1866-1884 (New York, 1975), p. 59; Senate, 43d Congress, 1st Session (1874), Senate Report 242, p. 2.

[37]Harlow, Old Wires, pp. 333-334, 338; Operator, Dec. 1, 1880.

The Wanamaker scheme envisioned a private company subcontracting telegraph service for the government under a special franchise somewhat similar to the way that the government moved the mails via privately-owned railroads and steamships. See House of Representatives, 51st Congress, 2d Session (1890), House Executive Document, Part 4.

Not all of the "postal telegraph" proposals were actually for a single, government-owned network. Some, like Wanamaker's, were semi-public. A variant of this was a government-chartered company to provide competition with the Western Union. Those advocating fully public systems did not always demand that they be monopolies. Some envisioned a government system acting as a competitor and (rather like the TVA of the 1930s) a yardstick to force the Western Union to provide reasonably-priced service. (Another reason for not wanting to take over the Western Union and nationalize it through eminent domain was fear that the company would bilk taxpayers into compensating the company for overvalued, stock-watered property.) And, of course, some simply favored a state run system such as most Western nations adopted. For the various proposals, see Lindley, Constitution, pp. 43, 46, 53, 93-94, 248-250.

[38]For examples of pro-government telegraph arguments after the Great Strike, see, e.g., EA, June 1, Oct. 16, 1886; Jan. 1, 16, Feb. 16, June 16 and Nov. 16, 1887; on the general agitation, see Harlow, Old Wires, p. 338.

[39]Lindley, Constitution, p. 87; Harlow, Old Wires, pp. 336-337; for examples of the Western Union's anti-government telegraph campaign, see JT, Dec. 2, 1867, Jan. 15, Feb. 15, May 15 and 22, 1868.

Lindley claims that the company founded the JT to propagandize against the postal telegraph proposals. The JT doubtless did play such a role, but Lindley is ignorant of the growing unrest among the company's operators that was so much a moving force behind the Journal's creation as a house organ.

[40]Lindley, Constitution, pp. 248-249.

Lindley argues that telegraph customers--in effect merchants and other businessmen--"did not suffer from rates that cut deeply into their margins. Since the large bulk of telegraph business came from the commercial world, speed and accuracy were important." And the Western Union, Lindley says, provided those. Constitution, pp. 18-19.

[41]Ibid., p. 248; NYT, Jan. 29, 1881; Benson, Merchants, pp. 176-177; Operator, Nov. 18, 1882.

[42]Lindley, Constitution, p. 254; AC, Aug. 19 and 30, 1883; BG, July 25, 1883; Operator, Oct. 15, 1883; SR, Aug. 4, 1883; NOP, Aug. 18, 1883; for similar arguments before and after the strike period, see the Telegrapher,

Oct. 1, 1870 and Jan. 7, 1871; Operator, Dec. 1, 1880; EA, Sept. 1, 1886.

[43]Nation, Aug. 2, 1883; AC, Aug. 19, 1883.

[44]BG, July 21, 27, Aug. 1, 7 and 15, 1883; NYT, Aug. 1, 3, 6 and 23, 1883; BH, July 25 and 27, 1883; AC, Aug. 5, 1883; SR, Aug. 4, 1883; NYH, July 30, 1883; Labor and Capital, II, pp. 983-984; CPD, Aug. 17, 1883; Leslie's, Sept. 15, 1883; Senate, 48th Congress, 1st Session (1884), Senate Report 577, pp. 71-118.

Lester Lindley points out that many of the proposals for government intervention in telegraphy were based on an abiding faith in competition, with either chartered private systems or a government-owned network chastening the Western Union and breaking its monopoly. Lindley, perceptively, also notes the paradox of such competition-based proposals: rooted in an antebellum conception of monopoly as a state-conferred privilege, the plans sought to use the very same competition of the laissez-faire world of no de jure monopoly to combat the de facto monopoly of the Western Union which had itself arisen out of those same free-market conditions. Cultural persistence, in short, blinded contemporaries to changing economic realities.

So far, so good, But Lindley's work is seriously flawed by his need to see the course of late 19th-century reform leading inevitably to the liberal regulatory state of the 20th century as a "workable alternative" to the extremes of laissez-faire and (in the case of the telegraph) government ownership. The Populists and Progressives, he says, represented that ineluctable and pragmatic reform current. But Lindley has dug neither widely nor deeply into the reform upsurge of the Gilded Age. Such proto-Progressives as Frank Parsons and Richard Ely were calling for nationalized natural monopolies, the telegraph among them. So were the Populists whom Lindley invokes but whose Omaha Platform, with its call for government telegraphs and railroads, he has evidently never bothered to read. To this list of government telegraph advocates I would also add the contemporary Knights of Labor, Georgites, Greenback-Laborites, National Anti-Monopoly League, and American Federation of Labor. Nor did all of these favor a competitive version of a postal telegraph. See Lindley, Constitution, pp. v, 255; Fine, Laissez-Faire, Ch. IX; and above, Ch. V, footnote 151.

[45]Labor and Capital, I, p. 1113; BH, Aug. 12, 1883; AC, Aug. 5, 1883; for other labor and reform advocacy of postal telegraphy, see, e.g., NYT, July 6, 1883; IW,

July 28, 1883; Labor and Capital, I, p. 483; Fine, Laissez-Faire, Ch. IX.

[46]TA, Sept. 1, 1883.

[47]Ibid.; BET, Aug. 18, 1883.

[48]BET, July 20 and 24, 1883; SR, July 25 and Aug. 6, 1883; AC, Aug. 4, 1883; BG, Aug. 15, 1883; CPD, July 25 and Aug. 16, 1883; NYH, July 24, 1883; Leslie's, July 28, 1883; NYT, July 23 and 27, 1883; Bradstreet's, July 28, 1883, quoted in Operator, Aug. 1, 1883.

[49]BET, July 23, 1883; SR, July 20, 1883.
Speaking of the Western Union's lack of paternalism, the SR declared: "We believe every employer owes this to the employe and no less so, when he takes the impersonal form of a corporation."

[50]NYT, Aug. 9, 1883; Operator, Aug. 1, 1883; Labor and Capital, I, p. 1113.
Swinton was arguing for public ownership of such concentrated enterprises, including telegraphy.

[51]NYH, Aug. 20, 1883; TA, Sept. 1, 1883.

[52]BH, Aug. 10, 1883.

[53]Fine, Laissez-Faire.

[54]Robert H. Wiebe, The Search for Order (New York, 1967).

[55]Richard Oestreicher argues that working-class activism of the 1880s would converge with sophisticated business and liberal reform in the 1890s to both "create new coalitions" prefiguring the Progressive-liberal bloc of the 20th century and to "make the re-emergence of an independent working-class political movement," such as the Knights of Labor implied, "more difficult." I find this a generally convincing argument, and one that might also apply to the ambiguous reform urge that the Great Strike excited.
In the matter of cross-class coalitions in the Gilded Age, Herbert Gutman's exploratory essays in the 1960s suggested that local businessmen and workers at times aligned against rapacious outside capitalists. Leon Fink, on the other hand, based on several case studies, rejected Robert Wiebe's contention that small "island communities"

were less torn by internal class conflict than by the assaults of the new national-market corporations. "The workingmen's movement challenged the very pillars of the old community, or at least that local community with which the workers themselves had direct experience," Fink writes. See Oestreicher, "Solidarity," p. 430; Herbert G. Gutman, Work, Culture and Society (New York, 1977), Chapts. 5-7; Leon Fink, Workingmen's Democracy (Urbana, 1983), pp. 219-220.

The argument about the essential conservatism of liberal reform is not new. Prominent examples of scholarship supporting this view are Samuel Hays, "The Politics of Reform in Municipal Government in the Progressive Era," Pacific Northwest Quarterly, Oct. 1964; James Weinstein, The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900-1918 (Boston, 1968); Gabriel Kolko, The Triumph of Conservatism (Chicago, 1963). Somewhat in the same vein, though seeing more ambivalence in Progressivism and its business practitioners, is Robert Wiebe, Businessmen and Reform (Chicago, 1962). To this list I would add Melvin Holli's portrait of Hazen Pingree, Reform in Detroit, which, while sympathetic to its subject, is good on the nuance and variety within the Progressive-liberal reform spectrum; see especially pp. 43, 62, 138-140, 159, 160-162, 169-171. And for another contemporary liberal in the Pingree mold, see Harry Barnard's old-fashioned biography of John Peter Altgeld, Eagle Forgotten (Indianapolis, 1938).

E P I L O G U E

On August 3, 1981, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization, a union which had endorsed the right-wing presidential candidacy of Ronald Reagan in 1980, struck against its employer, the federal government, demanding improvements in pay and working conditions within their notoriously high-stress occupation. Now in office, Reagan, who had responded to PATCO's pre-election support with a pledge "to work very closely with you to bring about a spirit of cooperation between the President and the air traffic controllers," promptly set out to break the strike. Within a few months he had done so, decertifying the union, firing 11,000 of its members, and filling their places with scabs. The president had hewed to the letter of the law, but his actions were meant as much to symbolize the new administration's attitude toward the labor movement as to enforce the law of the land. Workers took the lesson to heart. Postal service employees accepted a contract that many of them would have otherwise rejected had not the PATCO debacle been fresh in their minds. The Reagan administration, and the social forces that it represented, had used the air controllers' strike to re-declare class war in the most vigorous terms.[1]

This was no Great Strike redivivus. Air traffic controllers were not telegraphers, nor the Federal Aviation Adminstration the Western Union. The broad support that the operators had attracted was missing, too. Few Americans felt sorry for strikers earning $30,000-$40,000 a year whose walkout had put personal interest before the safety of the flying public.[2]

Yet there were similarities between 1883 and 1981. Like many telegraphers, air traffic controllers worked under intense pressure, and medical and emotional problems often went with the job. Most quit in their 40s, and only 11% reached formal retirement. And, like the Brotherhood of Telegraphers, PATCO drew criticism for its handling of the strike. AFL-CIO leaders unofficially scored the union for having "acted precipitously" and for neglecting "a broad education program to convince Americans to support their views."[3]

Differences between the labor movement and PATCO went much deeper than tactics. The controllers' relative affluence dulled sympathy for their cause among other unionists. Privately, AFL-CIO chiefs told one journalist that the strikers' high salaries, "particularly compared to industrial workers who may be earning $15,000 to $20,000 a year," made it hard to take up PATCO's cause with any enthusiasm. All the more galling was the controllers' support of Reagan the year before. Although

PATCO's endorsement had come as much from exasperation at the policies of the FAA under the previous Carter administration as from political conservatism, their backing for the California Republican had angered and disgusted the AFL-CIO hierarchy. The strike's illegality made labor bureaucrats tread cautiously during the walk-out, but the "lukewarm" support tendered PATCO was also the result of the tension and antipathy between the national trade union movement and its air traffic controller affiliate.[4]

One hundred years after the Great Strike, the "new" middle class that the operators had presaged is no longer new, but the ambiguity and instability of its peculiar social position remain. The telegraphers of 1883 are long gone, yet later kindred occupations--air traffic controllers among them--continue to embody much the same mix of class and culture: paid well above the average, possessing a white-collar, technical specialty, but still subordinate and vulnerable employees who must form a union little different from those of carpenters or steelworkers to protect themselves. But what blue-collar union would prefix its name with the word "professional," as PATCO did? And what occupational group normally reckoned a profession would have to use that same word to establish its status? An "American Professional Medical Association" or "American Professional Bar Association" or

"American Society of Professional Mechanical Engineers" would sound both pointless and ludicrous. Air traffic controllers, though, had no such cultural self-assurance. Or take another manifestation of the lower-middle class of the jet age: stewardesses and stewards organized themselves into something called the Association of Professional Flight Attendents, a name that likewise betrays a vague sort of social insecurity. And all of this resonates with the declarations of the "gentlemanly" and "refined" telegraphers of the 1880s.[5]

Much has changed in the past century. We are undergoing a third industrial revolution. The old "smokestack" industries decline or move to more profitable, low-wage settings; a new "high-tech" service economy, with its small managerial and technocratic elite and its vast and growing white and pink-collar proletariat, is proclaimed the wave of the future; and both the work force and poverty increasingly become the new women's spheres. Technological innovation underlies these changes, but so do the dynamics and recurring crises of a world capitalist economy. Rather than the "permanent revolution" that corporate publicists so enthusiastically celebrated in the 1950s, the Affluent Society of post-World War II America was a fleeting truce in a shifting and inveterate conflict. When the informal economic and military empire of the United States faltered in the 1970s and 80s, the social contract at home dissolved.

A "middle-class" America stagnated and shrank.

Gilded Age telegraphers would probably have recognized many aspects of the current crisis, for the 1880s, too, was a time when strong, swift, and erratic economic currents undermined or swept away established notions of the dignity and justice due workers and citizens. The Knights of Labor had set out to resist this degradation. It had sought not to stop change blindly, but to stop blind change. It had tried to measure the new forces in the workplace and marketplace against a scale keyed to self-respect and commonwealth, rather than to profit and loss.

In the short run, the Knights failed. Powerful adversaries defeated them, but they defeated themselves, too. They did not do so out of stupidity or masochism, but out of misjudgment and force of habit. Most people are conservative in the true sense of the word. Oppression is uncomfortable, but breaking out of an accustomed mold is sometimes more painful--at least in the short run. Culture and convention can be formidable means of resistance for a society under attack. Such was the role that republicanism and domesticity played for 19th-century American men and women undergoing a capitalist industrial revolution. But culture and convention can also be immobilizing ruts. That was why laborers and kid-gloved laborers eyed each other with

suspicion, if not outright dislike, in 1883. The Knights struggled with this problem as much as with that of the "wages system," monopoly, and cooperation. Their failure was not for lack of sincere effort.

But in the long run, the Knights--including the Knights and Ladies of the Key--did not fail. They still speak to us. They caution us about the illusory quality of white collars and "professional" unions and "middle-class" workers. They teach us about the hobbling tenacity of culture, but also of its ambivalence and power: of its ability to retain what is best in our past, to reject what is worst in our present, and to create what will be noblest in our future.

N O T E S

[1]Frank Ackerman, Reaganomics. Rhetoric vs. Reality (Boston, 1982), pp. 110, 113.

[2]NYT, Aug. 4, 1981.

[3]Ackerman, Reaganomics, p. 111; NYT, Aug. 4 and 7, 1981.

[4]NYT, Aug. 7, 25 and Oct. 23, 1981; Ackerman, Reaganomics, pp. 111-112.

[5]For the Association of Professional Flight Attendents, see NYT, Aug. 15, 1981.

As to the educational qualifications for air traffic controllers, the FAA, which trained them, required applicants to possess a high school diploma and to pass physical and aptitude tests. Training lasted 2 years for non-radar posts, and 3 years for radar duty. The absence of advanced college and technical degree requirements makes the job's "professional" status all the more moot--and PATCO's use of the word all the more revealing. See NYT, Aug. 4, 1981.

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